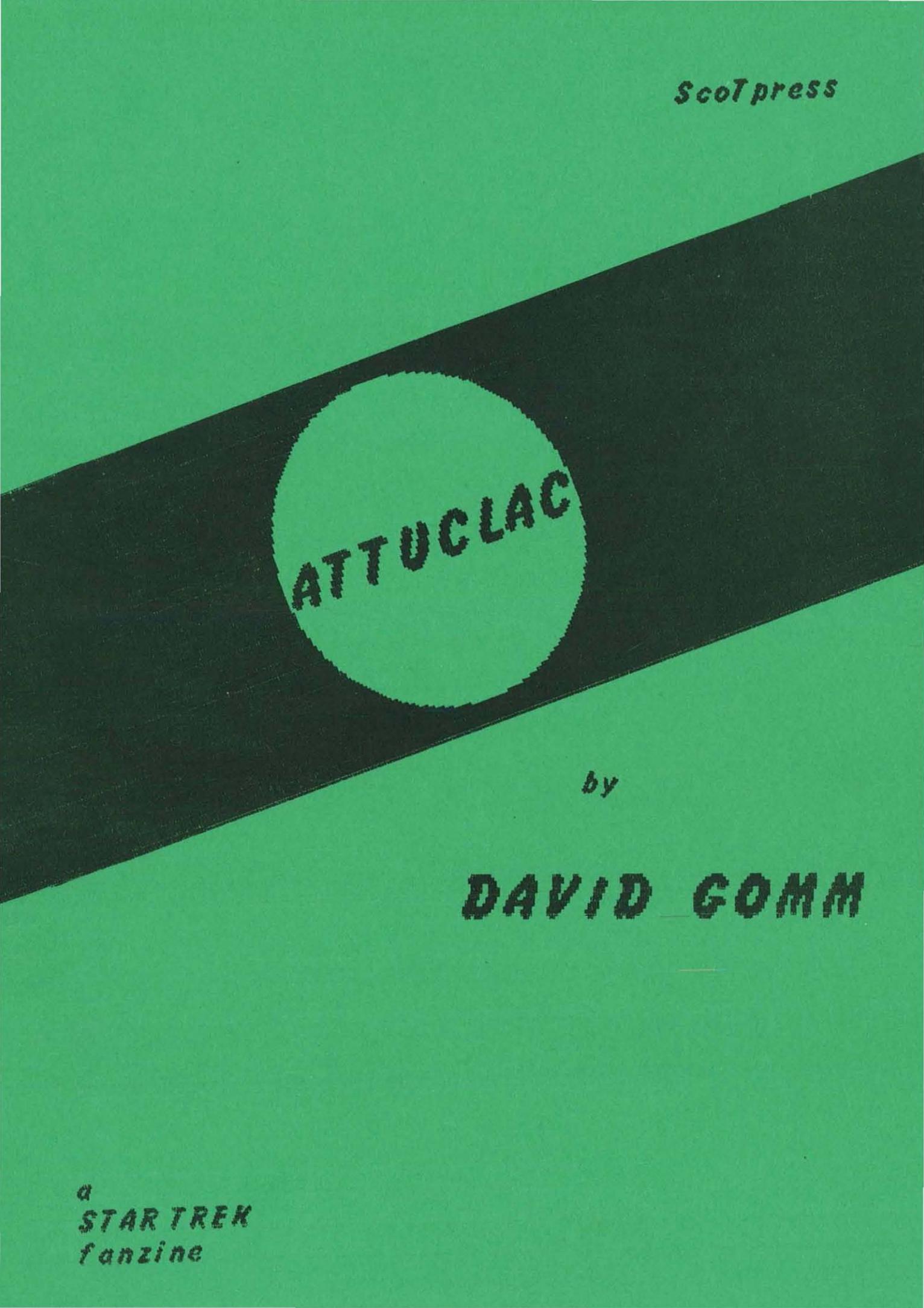


*Scotpress*



ATTUCLAC

*by*

**DAVID GOMM**

*a*  
**STAR TREK**  
fanzine

# ATTUCLAC

by

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Captain's Log Stardate 8064.2

The Enterprise has been ordered to investigate the disappearance of five richly laden Federation spaceliners on the trunk route between Starbase 12 and the Stetton Colonies. The triangular sector of empty space where the disappearances occurred has been designated an intergalactic spaceway and is widely used by the Romulans and Klingons as well as ourselves. Intelligence sources report that they have been suffering similar losses.

Because of its sinister reputation, the Stetton Triangle has become known as 'Parsec Bermuda'.

The man's face was ashen grey, but underlying the ravages left by his terrible period of deprivation was the suggestion that he had once been brown-skinned. His accent, insofar as it could be determined from his pronunciation of a single unknown word, seemed to bear this out, for in it was the unmistakable sound of the Indian sub-continent.

"There is very little time." The man at the interrogator's right hand wore the insignia of a rear admiral in Starfleet's medical branch. "I daren't give him another shot."

The interrogator leaned forward urgently.

"Mr. Ram. You must tell us. What happened to your ship?"

Just for an instant the brown eyes seemed to focus, as Ram croaked painfully, "It... was..." But then the light of madness returned. "Attuclac," he repeated. "Attuclac! Attuclac! Attuclac!" And the peals of maniacal laughter, more horrible than ever, echoed round the briefing room, until Mr. Spock switched off the viewer and the lights came up.

It was left to Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw to break the ensuing silence.

"What happened to him?"

Spock's eyebrows lifted a millimetre or two, just enough to emphasise the fact that there was only one logical answer.

"He died, Miss Kinshaw."

"And that was all he said?"

"Just one word?"

"Three words, to be exact, Mr. Sulu. One of which he repeated many times. Attuclac."

"A word which doesn't exist."

"The word clearly exists, Mr. Chekov, since Ensign Ram employed no other from the moment he was picked up. As to its meaning, phonetic searches of all known galactic tongues have failed to find any interpretation which could reasonably have a bearing on the disappearances."

Uhura had been contemplating the tips of her long, elegant fingers. She looked up. "Would it need to have a meaning, Mr. Spock? If space pirates are responsible, isn't it possible that 'Attuclac' was the name of their ship?"

"It is certainly possible, Lieutenant, but not... probable. Ram's whole demeanour - the repeated use of the word but more especially the amount of amusement he appeared to derive from it - suggested that it had a significance for him personally. It is unfortunate that the significance appears to have escaped the rest of the known universe."

Captain James Kirk decided that it was time to take the meeting in hand.

"To sum up, then. Five Federation ships have been lost at intervals ranging from seven to twenty seven standard months. There is every reason to think that the cause - whatever it is - is cyclical in nature. The two known Romulan losses occurred in our long gap. If we assume, as I believe we can, that there have also been two Klingon casualties, this makes the period of maximum danger recur every 6.5 to 7 months." His eye caught a fidgety movement. "Yes, Miss Kinshaw?"

"Is there any common denominator, sir? Between the ships that disappeared?"

"They didn't come back," suggested Chekov helpfully.

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov," said Kirk gravely. "That apart, no. One of the Romulans was no more than a four-berth scoutcraft, while the Titanic, as you know, was the largest passenger liner ever built."

"Doomed." The word came in a rich and sepulchral Irish brogue from somewhere at the back. "Doomed and accursed."

"Ensign?"

Ensign Michael Potato, finding himself the centre of attention, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Sure, and wasn't it asking for trouble to be giving the poor ship a name like that?"

"Illogical, Spud." The D.S.O. got in just ahead of her chief, whose eye she was careful to avoid. "Whatever destroyed the Titanic would still have done so if her name had been - " She plucked a name at random out of the air - "Mary Rose."

If the former Irish Vampire had not worshipped the very deck that the D.S.O. walked on, he might have pointed out that, when offered a choice of postings between the Enterprise and the Hood, she had unhesitatingly opted for the former. But he did, so he didn't,

and there would not have been time if he had. For at that precise moment, and at something close to warp speed, the Enterprise struck atmosphere.

For once in his life, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, conning the Enterprise from the comfort of the Captain's chair, was a relaxed man, if not a happy one. The true pessimist is totally fulfilled only when events are proving him right. But the ship's engines were running as sweetly as even Mr. Scott's exacting standards could desire; there was not so much as a trace of imbalance in the matter/antimatter pods; all life-support systems were tuned to the peak of efficiency and the shields, currently armed and extended for a routine test, were functioning perfectly, without causing even the most minuscule of power drains.

It was as well that they were.

Striking even the outermost layers of a planet in an unshielded ship at warp speed is not a practice recommended in the best astronavigation manuals. Even as it was, the shields were stripped bare, while the residual speed was still enough to leave the hull glowing a dull red. The rise in interior temperature would have baked the crew in their jackets like four hundred potatoes had it not been for an instantaneous icy counterblast from the environmental control system.

Space movies, even those depicting ships of the Constitution class, tend to show crews being tossed about like popcorn at the slightest external turbulence. In practice, of course, things have to be different; the colossal accelerations would pound crews to jelly were it not for the cushioning effect of inbuilt gravity neutralisation systems. Even the dead stop caused by the sudden appearance of a new and unsuspected planet in the ship's path did no more than deposit the stampede of senior officers from the elevator on to the bridge at a slightly undignified turn of speed.

Scott's face was a picture.

"I canna understand it, Cap'n. One moment there wasnae one solid body within two parsecs, the next - it was on us."

Mr. Spock had hurried to the main computer console.

"Almost correct, Mr. Scott," he confirmed after the computer had analysed the flight recorder's data. "The planet materialised from nothing in 9.27 nanoseconds." He looked up at the main viewscreen, which was filled by the bright world around which the Enterprise was now in a stable orbit. "Fascinating!"

"That's certainly quick, Mr. Spock"

"Indeed it is, Captain. That in itself makes the planet... most interesting. What fascinates me more, however, is its brightness."

"What's so special about it?" Dr. McCoy had joined the others on the bridge, having first ascertained that there were no serious casualties. "It's no brighter than Earth - the daylight side, that is." He paused for thought. "Ah!"

"Exactly so, Doctor. For daylight, you need a sun. This planet is isolated light years from the nearest star system. The 'sunlight'

we observe must originate from within the atmosphere itself." He broke off to examine the preliminary sensor readings. "And there are life forms."

"Specify."

"Difficult to say, Captain. The life-force readings do not signify life as we know it, and yet some of the patterns are quite definitely humanoid. It is as if - "

"Go on, Mr. Spock."

"If you asked me for speculation, Captain, I would say that this is how I would expect the sensors to depict a Human world from another continuum."

There was an awed silence, broken when Chekov said, "Well, at least we now what happened to the Titanic. If this planet materialised in front of her..." His voice tailed off.

"Possible, Mr. Chekov, but... unlikely. Had it struck the atmosphere a glancing blow, as we did, it would have survived.

"Unless her shields were down," suggested Sulu.

"Not Captain Calvert," said Kirk emphatically. "I knew him. Very much a book man. For a passenger ship to enter warp drive unshielded is strictly forbidden."

"Unthinkable," agreed Spock.

"But suppose she hit head on?" Chekov persisted.

"I was coming to that." Spock left the sensors and moved down to join the group at the navigation controls. "The shock wave caused by a ship the size of the Titanic entering the lower atmosphere at warp speed would have been sufficient to devastate half the planet. Sensors show no signs of recent catastrophe. Nor is there any significant concentration of free metal, which rules out any possibility of a soft landing."

"So now we have two mysteries, not one."

"I did not say that, Doctor. I would estimate the chance against the planet being unconnected with the disappearances at -531.25 to one."

"Approximately," murmured Sulu, with a grin at Chekov.

"Precisely," admonished Spock, whose ears were sharp as well as pointed.

Captain Kirk came to a decision. "Lt. Uhura. Please notify the transporter room. Six to beam down. Have Ensign Potato and two security guards standing by. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, you will join me on the landing party. Mr. Scott, you have the conn."

Spock stood his ground. "Inadvisable, Captain."

Kirk looked at him questioningly.

"Whatever destroyed the Titanic is still operational, and if the assumption of a 6.5 month cycle is correct we are approaching the

period of maximum risk. It would be a logical precaution for one of us to remain with the ship."

"Agreed. Very well, Mr. Spock, you will take command of the Enterprise while I - What is it now?"

"With respect, Jim. We are confronted with a planet whose features and capabilities are highly... unusual. As Science Officer I am better trained to make an accurate assessment of its nature. Similarly, Dr. McCoy is best qualified to make a study of the inhabitants. As for the security personnel, I think that their presence might be - "

"A hindrance," put in McCoy, naming no names but thinking of one in particular.

"I was going to say inconducive to our freedom to react to circumstances on an ad-hoc basis."

"I believe I just said that, Spock," growled McCoy, who had been waiting years for a chance to deliver that line.

Kirk was forced to laugh. "All right, Mr. Spock, you win. But at the first sign of trouble you beam back up. Understood?"

"Why, naturally, Captain. We shall beam up as soon as that is the logical course of action." And with that Kirk had to be content.

Despite the planet's apparent brightness, it was dark when the two officers materialised on the surface. They found themselves in a dingy street, ill-lit by gas lamps. The windows were heavily curtained, save one, larger than the rest, from which there came a stream of light, a babble of loud talk and raucous laughter, and a stench of tobacco smoke and stale beer.

Before they could get their bearings, two swarthy men in calico trousers and dark blue jerseys staggered out of the public bar. Spock, mindful of his conspicuous appearance, took a step backwards into the shadows. In doing so he encountered something solid, from which there came an oath, followed by an exclamation of "'Ere, watch where you're going, can't yer. That's me bleedin' bunions you're treading on!"

"I am sorry," Spock said evenly. "I did not see you."

"Oh, toffs," said the owner of the bunions disgustedly, as if that explained everything. "'Hai'm sorry, hai didn't see you'. Fink yerself lucky I'm not Jack the Ripper, then."

It was on the tip of McCoy's tongue to say that they had already met the gentleman, but he wisely decided that the Ripper's might not be a good acquaintance to claim. Instead, he said, "Can you help us, please? My friend and I are strangers here, and we seem to have lost our way."

Bunions guffawed, and spat expertly at a drain, some six feet away from where they were standing.

"Lorst? I'll say you are, me old cully. Wapping ain't no place fer the likes of you."

"Wapping!" McCoy could not help exclaiming.

"Yus. Wapping. One up from Rother'ithe."

"Interesting," mused Spock. But before he could apply his mind to this extraordinary revelation there was a commotion, and the two lascar sailors returned from their urgent business at the rear of the pub. Bunions took the opportunity presented by the diversion to pick the communicator from McCoy's pocket. Palming it, he turned his attention to Spock's, only to find his wrist held in a vice-like grip. Spock's intention was merely to save himself from being robbed, but Bunions, mistaking it, cried out to the lascars, "Hey, shipmates, you ain't going to let this nark run me in, are yer?" and before you could say *I'm a doctor, not a prize-fighter* a full-scale brawl was in progress. Spock was wrong-footed and sent sprawling. He recovered quickly and settled the issue with simultaneous left and right handed nerve pinches, but not before McCoy had sustained a mighty blow full in the left eye.

Unfortunately, with both hands full of sagging lascar, Spock had nothing in reserve with which to deal with Bunions, who lifted the second communicator and, wriggling out of McCoy's weakened grasp, dashed into the public bar with cries of "'Elp! Murder!" and (lobbing the stolen communicators to a friend in the throng,) "Thieves!"

There was no alternative but flight. Pursued by a couple of dozen well-beered bruisers, Spock and McCoy took to their heels.

The alley down which they had taken flight opened eventually on to a main road, still cobbled but much better lit. As they dashed out into the roadway there was a cry of "Look out, there!", a neighing of startled horses, and the scream of iron-rimmed wheels on cobblestones. A torrent of verbal abuse from the coachman was cut off in its prime as the occupant of the carriage descended, his round, jolly face a picture of concern.

"My dear sirs, a thousand apologies. Tell me, I pray, that you have sustained no injuries."

McCoy picked himself up from the gutter, into which he had been forced to dive in order to avoid the flying hooves. He prodded himself experimentally.

"Nothing broken, Mister. And it was our fault, not your driver's." He was about to explain that they had been set upon by robbers, when he was horrified to see the newcomer staring in amazement at Spock's profile. Illuminated as it was by a trio of brilliantly incandescent gas mantles from a nearby street lamp, Spock's left ear stood out like a floodlit cathedral spire on a very dark night.

Muttering "That's done it," McCoy mentally prepared himself for further flight. But it was not Spock's ear that had caught the man's attention.

"Why, it's - No, it can't be. But yes. That distinguished profile. That famous chin. That noble brow! 'Pon my soul, I declare it is." He seized Spock's hand and pumped it vigorously up and down, Spock's slightly glazed expression as he closed his mind to the unexpected physical contact serving only to make him pump all the harder. "A pleasure and a privilege - no, an honour! - to make your acquaintance. Yours too, of course, Doctor." (The 'noble brow'

lifted fractionally.) "In pursuit of the logical conclusion to yet another baffling puzzle, I'll be bound! Am I not right, sir?"

"Indeed you are," agreed Spock truthfully, wondering how he could distract the man's attention from McCoy for long enough to allow the latter to get a tricorder reading on this inhabitant of the mystery planet.

"I knew it, I knew it!" The rotund little man positively chortled with delight. "And having tracked the villain to his lair he somehow managed to turn the tables and rob you of the wherewithal to return to your lodgings."

Spock inclined his head gravely, thinking of the stolen communicators.

"At any other time," the man went on, "it would give me the greatest pleasure to place my carriage at your disposal, but alas, I have an engagement at Greenwich for which I am already tardy. But here, I perceive, comes the providential solution to our dilemma. Hey, there, Hansom! Whoa, I say!"

The two-wheeled horse-drawn vehicle which pulled up alongside them was clearly some kind of public hackney carriage. Its driver, who seemed a manly enough fellow despite having raised no objection to being addressed as 'handsome' by a total stranger, conferred with their benefactor. There was a glint of gold as a coin changed hands; then, almost before they knew it, the cab's two frontal doors had closed upon them and Spock and McCoy were being whisked at a spanking pace through a city which looked remarkably like, and yet could not possibly be, nineteenth century London.

Once they had passed a huge and ancient-looking stone fortress (that couldn't be the Tower of London - could it?) their surroundings became increasingly prosperous. The cab was clearly not built for long journeys, and its jolting motion was by no means a pleasant sensation, so it was with great relief when, after taking a right turn and rattling along for a further half mile or so, it finally slowed down and came to a standstill.

The driver opened up and spoke through a small trap in the roof. "'Ere we are, gents. Mind the step, now." And, as first McCoy and then Spock opened their doors and descended gratefully to terra firma, "Fare's all taken care of."

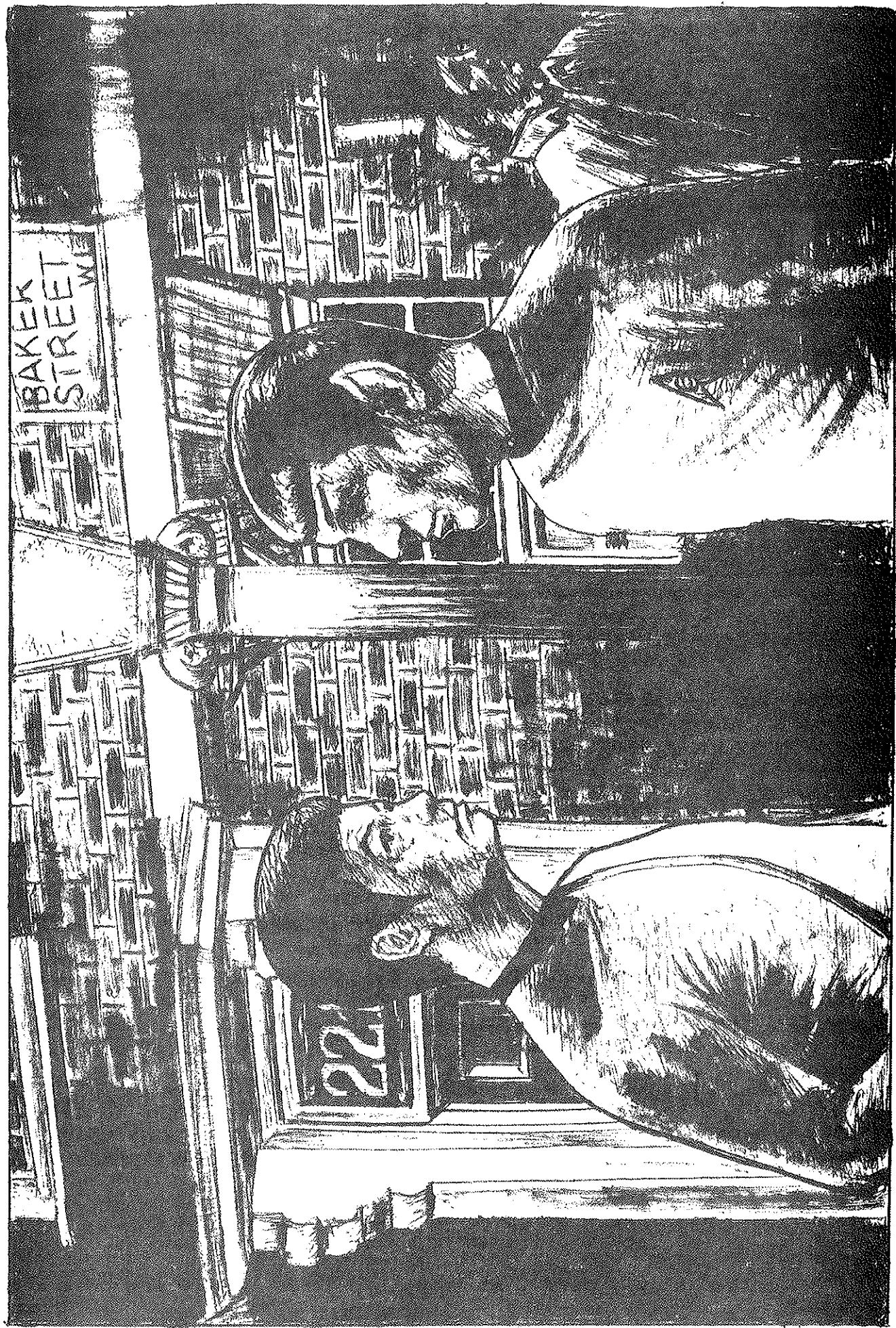
"But where the devil are we?" exclaimed McCoy as the cab rattled away.

"Precisely where I expected to be, Doctor," said Spock, calmly and infuriatingly. And as McCoy continued to look around him blankly, "Really, Doctor! You see, but you do not observe." He pointed upwards, to the wall of a corner house on which was painted the street name 'BAKER STREET, W', and then the door outside which they were standing, which bore the number 221b. "I seem to have acquired a non-existent identity."

McCoy had not made a study of nineteenth century Earth literature, as had Spock, but even he recognised that address.

"Well, that's just dandy, Mr. Shlock Holmes. But where does it leave me?"

Spock regarded him with an expression which, for him, came



perilously close to a smile.

"I should say that that was - elementary, my dear Watson!"

"Enterprise to landing party. Enterprise to landing party. Come in, please."

Uhura looked up helplessly. "It's no good, Captain. I can't raise them."

"Keep trying, Lieutenant."

"Captain!" Sulu's voice was urgent. "There's another ship in orbit around the planet. She's out of visual range, but I think - Yes, there she is again. Captain, I'm sure of it - she's a Klingon."

Kirk snapped into action.

"Scan her, Miss Kinshaw. As quickly as you can. Lt. Uhura, signal yellow alert. Don't go to action stations yet, but be prepared." He opened the intercom channel. "Bridge to Engineering. Scotty, can you give us some shields?"

"Not unless ye want our orbit to start decaying, sir. I've barely enough power to maintain it as it is."

"How long before we're fully operational?"

"Three hours, sir. At the very least."

"Make it two. Got those scanner readings yet, Miss Kinshaw?"

"Coming up now, sir." The D.S.O. cast an eye over the readout, expertly picking out the salient points. "She's the Kolyno'os\*, sir. Captain Kring."

"Is she indeed. I wondered whether we'd ever meet up with her. What a pity Spock's off-ship." And as the D.S.O. clearly didn't understand what he was driving at, "Look again, Miss Kinshaw. I think you'll find there's more."

"First Officer Keong. Science Officer - " The D.S.O.'s chin dropped comically - "Skunk."

"I bet he's a real steenker," muttered Chekov. There was a ripple of laughter, in which the D.S.O. did not join. Her brows knitted together as they always did when she was concentrating on something difficult, making the tiny bump at the bridge of her nose appear more prominent. "Isn't that a Vulcan name?"

"More than just a Vulcan name. The story goes that Sarek had a first cousin, T'Pir, who was a junior consular official on Zandvic."

Finding Kirk looking at her expectantly, the D.S.O. cast her mind back, dredging up half-forgotten knowledge of the history of Klingon-Federation relations.

\*footnote - Kolyno'os: a sabre-toothed Klingon mountain lion, with exceptionally white fangs.

"That was the Vulcan-administered planet which fell to the Klingons at the beginning of the second war."

"Right. It seems that the Klingon military commandant decided to take himself a Vulcan mistress, and his eye lit on T'Pir. I doubt if she had much say in the matter to begin with, but the fact remains that when Zandvic finally fell and the Vulcan prisoners were exchanged, she insisted on staying. To this day Sarek's family refuse to speak of the incident - although it is said that on the lesser-of-two-evils principle it helped to gain their acceptance of Sarek's own subsequent marriage."

"Then this Skunk - "

"Quite right, Miss Kinshaw. T'Pir's son. Half Klingon, half Vulcan. And Spock's second cousin."

"Activity, sir," Sulu reported suddenly.

The Kolyno'os was moving erratically, as if she were trying to manoeuvre into a more stable orbit, and not having too much success.

"Her engines are malfunctioning, sir." D.S.O. Kinshaw made a dash for the sensor console. "And she's completely unshielded. I'd say she was in serious trouble."

"Humm. Assessment?"

Can't say for sure, sir. But I'd guess she hit the planet's atmosphere just as we did, and didn't get off so lightly."

"Is she in immediate danger?"

"No, sir. But they'll have to get those engines working properly. Her orbit's decaying already. I'd give her ten days at the outside."

It might have been the inadequate lighting - the flimsy cerium oxide gas mantles disintegrated at a touch and a cursing Dr. McCoy had ruined two of them and broken countless matches before finding the knack of coping with gaslight - but Mrs. Hudson, Spock-Holmes' housekeeper, showed not the slightest surprise at the unusual shape of her lodger's ears. 'Dr. Watson's' eye was quite another matter.

"Oh, you poor man!" she cried as soon as she saw it. "That's a real shiner, that is. I suppose Mr. Holmes has been getting you into scrapes again."

"It's nothing, Mrs. - "

"Hudson," Spock prompted him hastily.

" - Mrs. Hudson. It'll be quite all right in a day or two."

"Now, now, Doctor. You don't need to tell me to tell you what's best for a black eye." She hurried out, returning a few minutes later brandishing a generously-sized beefsteak. Spock recoiled mentally, although his face remained impassive. He could not recall whether Holmes had been a vegetarian, but he rather thought not; his whole Vulcan metabolism was cringing with distaste at the thought of having to eat the revolting object. He was therefore more than a

little taken aback when Mrs. Hudson walked straight past him and slapped the steak firmly and juicily on McCoy's black eye.

"There we are, Doctor. Be right as ninepence in no time. Mind you keep it on for the whole hour, now. Mr. Holmes, I'm trusting you to see that he does. Never was a doctor but made a terrible patient."

"If we have to cook and eat that," said Spock after she had gone, "would not some kind of flame be quicker?"

"At last!" McCoy exclaimed to the world at large. "Something the great Science Officer doesn't know. For your information, Mr. Spock, the idea is that contact with the beefsteak will draw the bruising out of my black eye."

Spock's eyebrows didn't quite disappear beneath his hairline. But it was a close thing.

"Indeed, Doctor? Then it would appear that this planet's medical palliatives are even more rudimentary than yours."

McCoy could not think of a suitably crushing reply to that, so he said instead, "And what, may I ask, does the great detective propose that we should do now?"

"Why nothing, obviously."

"Nothing!"

"Exactly so."

"Dammit, Spock, we're stranded on a strange planet which is likely to disappear at any moment. Our communicators are lost, probably for good, so we've no way of yelling for help. And you say 'do nothing'. If that's the obvious solution to you, it certainly isn't to me."

"Then I shall endeavour to explain. Our mission is to study this planet and its inhabitants. Our equipment is lost and there is no way of sending for more. The only clue we have is that somehow whoever or whatever controls this planet has manufactured identities for us, placing us in the twin roles of characters from your classical mythology. It is unlikely that we shall simply be left in these roles indefinitely. Therefore, the logical course of events would be for the solution of the puzzle - eventually - to come to us."

The days on the mystery planet were characterised by blue skies, with a complete absence of clouds and, more remarkably, the complete absence of a sun. Nine of them were passed extremely profitably, as a succession of clients came to No. 221b Baker Street, to seek the great detective's advice. Many of their problems Spock solved there and then, by the simple application of logical thought; for these he charged a fee, ranging from a few coppers if the client seemed in straitened circumstances, to ten or twenty guineas where there was clear evidence of prosperity. (Since this was obviously a money-based society, and their stay was open-ended, it seemed prudent to accumulate some working capital.) Those cases which would have involved travel he rejected, on the grounds that he took only cases which interested him.

During all this time, Spock had made no attempt to hide his Vulcan ears, so it came as quite a surprise when on the tenth morning he said suddenly, "Watson, pray be so kind as to fetch me some headgear."

"Oh, really, Holmes," spluttered McCoy. "Is it absolutely necessary to keep up this H/W business even in private?"

Spock put his finger to his lips in the universal gesture for silence. "Please do as I ask, my dear fellow." Opening the door of the apartment, he was just in time to catch their landlady straightening herself from a stooping position. "Ah, Mrs. Hudson, good morning. I perceive that you have been preparing a dish of devilled kidneys for the good Doctor's breakfast."

"Marvellous, Holmes!" McCoy joined in the act. "How did you deduce that?"

"Elementary." Spock shrugged, modestly. "A few grains of mustard powder on your left shoe, Mrs. Hudson, proclaims the fact quite clearly. I shall content myself with a bowl of your excellent porridge. But I fear that our repast must be delayed, for I am expecting the imminent arrival of a most important client."

Dead on cue there came a peal of bells from the front door. "Ah, there he is now. Would you be so good as to admit him, while we make ready to receive him?" And as soon as the landlady was out of earshot, "Quickly, Doctor, have you found me a hat?"

"Try this." McCoy proffered a soft tweed deerstalker which he had snatched from a peg in the hall cupboard. Spock examined it, tried it on, found that it did not cover his ears, so did the logical thing and swivelled it through ninety degrees. The result was effective but comical.

"Spock, you can't possibly wear it like that. You'll make yourself conspicuous."

"Your point is accurate, Doctor, but nonetheless illogical, since I should undoubtedly be conspicuous without it. Ah, what have we here?" His eye lit upon a second deerstalker, of the type whose flaps can be lowered to protect the ears from the Scottish climate. "This, I think, should serve."

Hat was in place and flaps lowered not a moment too soon, as Mrs. Hudson returned and announced their visitor.

"Mr. Roy A. Trim, sir."

The newcomer was tall and thin, with ascetic-looking features and unusually deep-set eyes. His shoulders were rounded and his face protruded forwards in a curiously reptilian fashion. His thinness was accentuated by his waistcoat, trousers, and even his hat, all of which appeared to have been made for a larger man.

"Now, Mr. Trim," said Spock, when the courtesies had been observed and all three were seated. "Pray tell me in what small way I may be of service to you."

"It is difficult..." Mr. Trim hesitated. "It is difficult to know the logical place to begin."

"Speaking as a logician myself - and if I may presume to advise

you - the beginning is invariably best."

"Very well. Two years and four months ago, a - a sister of mine disappeared without trace. In this locality. I knew nothing of this at the time, you understand. Some time later, a second sister, who had come here in search of the first, also disappeared."

"Forgive me." Spock held up his hand. "But exactly how much time later, Mr. Trim. The point is of the utmost importance, I assure you."

"Some thirteen months. The exact time is uncertain, as we had - lost contact."

"As I thought. Please continue."

Trim leaned forward, earnestly. "Mr. Sherlock Holmes, it is my belief that you - "

"Enough!" Even as he spoke, Spock leaped out of his chair, his eyes blazing with an anger which, had he not known the Vulcan for so long, Dr. McCoy would have sworn was real. "This deception is at an end. You see, I know who you are."

"You do?" Trim's face remained impassive, but his eyebrows disappeared under the brim of his top hat.

"Naturally - Professor Moriarty." And then, urgently, "Stop him, Watson!"

'Trim' had not, in fact, moved, but stood apparently transfixed with surprise in that even so great a detective as Sherlock Holmes should have unmasked him so easily. Nevertheless, McCoy did as he was bidden and made as if to seize their visitor - only to be felled from behind by a Vulcan nerve pinch.

"You swine!" Spock smashed his right fist into the palm of his own left hand. "But you won't dispose of me so easily. You'll have to leave me bound and gagged if you want to escape with your life."

"What a very excellent idea, Mr. Holmes." So saying, Moriarty set to work with a will; soon Spock was tightly bound to his chair with the cord from Holmes' own dressing gown. The odd thing was that, from the faraway look on his face, you might have thought that he was enjoying the experience.

"Dammit, Spock, that Moriarty must be a prize fighter. He was so quick I never even felt him hit me."

Spock was saved from having to make an evasive reply by a knock on the door. Mrs. Hudson came in, accompanied by a tall gangling youth who seemed to have outgrown his cap and trousers.

"Ah, come in, Sykes. Did you get it?"

The captain of Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street Irregulars nodded, and handed over a flimsy red paper booklet.

"Yes, Mr. 'Olmes. I went to Cook's, like you said. Got you two first class seats on the arternoon flight to Basle." He pronounced it 'Basil'.

Spock did not bother to correct him, but said, "Thank you, Sykes. You have done well. Here is half a crown for your trouble. Mrs. Hudson will show you out." Then, when the landlady was halfway down the stairs, "Hurry, Doctor. We have very little time if we are to catch that flight."

McCoy threw up his hands in mock despair. "All right, Spock, I give up. What the heck is going on? Why do we keep going along with this Sherlock Holmes nonsense? When are we going to do something about contacting the ship? And why Switzerland, for Pete's sake?"

Spock crossed to the bookshelf. From it he took a slim volume and handed it to McCoy. "A little reading for the flight, Doctor. It should tell you everything. As for Switzerland, we are going there because, at the Falls of Reichenbach, was the scene of the final confrontation between Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty."

"And that's another thing. Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist. Dr. Watson doesn't exist. So presumably this Moriarty character doesn't exist either. Yet you claimed to have recognised him as soon as he walked in here."

"I did not say I recognised him, Doctor. I said that I knew he was coming. But even had I not known, his identity was amply confirmed by the curious incident of his hat."

"But he did nothing with his hat."

"That was the curious incident," remarked 'Sherlock Holmes'.

Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw looked up from her instruments. "Sir! Sensors detect two aircraft, flying on a parallel course. It's the first sign of any high technology I've found."

Kirk leaned towards the Engineering intercom. "Did you get that, Scotty?"

"Aye, sir. We'll keep tabs on them."

"Do that. What's the status on that Klingon, Miss Kinshaw?"

"Less than twelve hours to re-entry, sir. But there's a lot of oidar-activity - I think they're trying to restart their engines." She thought about that for a minute. Thought about it a bit more. Then exclaimed triumphantly, "GOT IT!"

Kirk was about to ask, "What have you got, Miss Kinshaw?" but at that moment Uhura broke in excitedly with, "Captain. I've located Mr. Spock's communicator. But - " Excitement was replaced by puzzlement as a raucous chorus of "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun," echoed round the bridge. "I don't think that's Mr. Spock."

"I'm sure it isn't," said Kirk grimly. "But I want to know who it is. Scotty, lock on to that communicator and beam it up. NOW!"

" - We'll keep the blues on the run - 'Ullo." The singer broke off in mid verse as four muscular security officers led by Ensign Potato converged upon the transporter pad. "'Ere, mind me bunions,

mate."

Captain Kirk, Ensign Chekov and Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw arrived in Engineering on the double as the newcomer was being frog-marched through it.

"Morning, all," he said cheerfully. "You look in a hurry. Where's the fire?"

"I took this off him, Sorr." Potato handed the still-open communicator to his Captain, who passed it on to the D.S.O.

"It's Mr. Spock's all right, sir," she confirmed. "There's a big chip out of the casing, but Mr. Spock said it would be illogical to replace it when its operation wasn't impaired." She looked sternly at Bunions. "Where did you get it?"

"Tall geezer. Big ears. Said you'd give me a dinner and a couple of sovs if I brought it back."

"So where is he now, Mister?" demanded Scott.

Bunions looked reproachful. "Guv'nor. Here's a poor fellow, down on his luck and faint from want of nourishment, and all you can do is ask questions."

"A bowl of chicken soup, perhaps," Scott suggested sarcastically.

Bunions hawked and spat disdainfully on the immaculately clean Engineering Section floor. "Chicken soup my ar - " He caught sight of D.S.O. Kinshaw starting to look deeply shocked. "My armpit. You're all toffs, you are. Vintage port and ripe pheasant, them's toff's vittles. And I ain't saying no more, not till I've 'ad some."

Kirk looked doubtfully at the D.S.O.. "Can the synthesiser cope?"

The D.S.O. smiled sweetly enough, but the varichrome eyes, still fixed unwaveringly on the chipped communicator, were icy blue. "I think we can manage that, sir. It'll just take a few minor adjustments."

She went to work at the nearest computer port, and within a couple of minutes was able to hand over a steaming plateful. Without bothering to sit down, Bunions tore a lump off the largest piece of pheasant and bit deeply. Then he clasped his hand to his jaw and sprayed the air liberally with Fs, the gist of which was, "It's full of effing bullets."

"Just one of the hazards of being a 'toff', sir," said the D.S.O. innocently. She leaned forward, her voice hardening. "Now talk."

But Bunions was past talking, then or ever. The six pieces of lead shot sank straight through him, landing on the floor with six little thuds. Then he collapsed on top of them.

With one big one.



MEDICAL LOG STARDATE 6056.3. Dr. Leonard McCoy reporting.

It is with a heavy heart that I record these last words in which I shall ever detail the singular gifts by which my friend Mr. Spock was distinguished. Since returning to the Enterprise - it will have been recorded in the Captain's Log how the ship's sensors tracked our flight to Basta and a landing party led by Ensign Chekov traced me from there to Meiringen - I have had the computer check the literature banks for an account of Sherlock Holmes' final meeting with Moriarty. The parallel is close but not exact. Unlike my alter ego, I was not summoned away on a false errand, but stood a helpless witness at thirty yards distance as Moriarty - I must call him that, for I know no other name - ambushed Spock on that rocky outcrop above the falls of Reichenbach and struggled with him briefly, before the two of them plunged together down the sheer drop towards the raging torrent beneath...

"Well, I won't believe he's dead until I've seen the body."

Alone among the stunned assembly on the bridge, Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw seemed unperturbed by Dr. McCoy's story. "And not even then," she added, in a display of contra-logic that would have reduced her chief to the Vulcan equivalent of despair. She had seemed hardly even to be paying attention, concentrating instead on the work she was doing at the main computer console. Only her smile of satisfaction at Dr. McCoy's description of Professor Moriarty and the curious incident of his hat betrayed how very keenly she had, in fact, been listening.

"I weesh you were right," said Chekov gloomily. "But I was there. I saw the two sets of footprints leading up the path. There were none coming back."

Uhura looked up from her station for the first time since McCoy had finished his story. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because I know who 'Professor Moriarty' really is. And for him and Mr. Spock to have really fought to the death would have been so illogical as to be unthinkable."

"I suppose you'll be telling us next that you've solved the mystery of the Titanic, too."

"As a matter of fact, Dr. McCoy - yes." And, as McCoy snorted with derision - "That book Mr. Spock gave you - it was about India, wasn't it?"

McCoy, thunderstruck, admitted, "Yes, it was, as it happens. But how - ?"

The D.S.O. was tempted to say 'Elementary', but decided that McCoy's blood pressure wouldn't stand it. "Just logic, Doctor."

"Miss Kinshaw," Kirk interposed gently, "far be it from me to suggest that you have been working with Mr. Spock for too long - but you are beginning to sound like him."

The D.S.O. tried to raise her left eyebrow while keeping the

right one lowered. It didn't work, so she said, "Sorry, sir. Just one more test. Won't take a moment." She had a final brief chat with the computer, then looked up and announced, "It's a white hole!"

"Preposterous," said Scott. Then, more kindly, "Sorry, lassie, but that's an old wives' tale."

"Correction." The computer's iron-maidenly tones cut through the sudden burst of discussion. "At the time her paper on the Theory of White Holes was published, Marita Halashnikova was a spinster."

"A little old lady from Leningrad!" Chekov exclaimed gleefully.

"Aged twenty four and Professor of Theoretical Astrogenetics at the University of Southampton," the computer went on, ignoring him.

"Will you explain, or shall I?" the D.S.O. asked it.

"Insufficient data. I cannot answer that question since I have no knowledge of your intentions in the matter."

"Then I suppose I'd better."

The D.S.O. turned to face her audience. "A white hole is a black hole existing at the exact conjunction of two major universes, affecting both but a part of neither."

"Major universes being?"

"Universes occupying totally different space-time dimensions, sir. As opposed to co-existing, or alternate, universes, such as those you enter via the Romulan Cloaking Device."

"Go on."

"It's been known for ages that when a black hole reaches a certain critical mass then it becomes a potential gateway to other dimensions. But in order to maintain that status it needs a constant supply of new energy. If it doesn't get it, it reverts to being just a large neutron star. It's a bit like a kettle going off the boil. Well, our white hole is located in one of the emptiest regions of all known space, so it never gets to exceed that latent energy level. It just oscillates between its two universes, casting about for any vestigial amounts of light or matter with which to sustain itself. I - " with a sideways glance at the computer - "I mean, we, calculate the period of oscillation of this one to be 6 months, 23 days, thirteen hours and twenty four minutes."

"Approximately," added the computer, standing in for its master.

"So poor Mr. Ram was only talking gibberish after all."

"Not at all, Uhura. He had it dead right. He even made up a little joke about it. Trouble was, all those weeks alone in space turned his brain, so he remembered the joke, but couldn't come up with the punch line. Has anybody heard of the Black Hole of Calcutta?"

Nobody had.

"I don't know much about it, but it was some sort of a prison, in India, in olden times. That was what Mr. Ram was trying to tell us. The Titanic was gobbled up by a kind of back-to-front black

hole. I only hit on it when the Klingons started up their engines and it dawned on me that oidar-activity - what we call the radioactivity emitted by radioactive matter - is RADIO activity backwards. And Calcutta backwards is - "

"Attuclac!" exclaimed the whole bridge crew, in unison.

And it was then that, like an old trouper who had been awaiting her cue, the ghost of the Titanic made her entrance, emerging from her hiding place in the dark recesses of interdimensional space. It grew to many times the giant ship's original size, even dwarfing the planet itself; clearly recognisable as the original Titanic, yet somehow formless and ethereal, like a gigantic lollipop that has been licked to a smooth translucence. As the ship materialised, so the planet began to dissolve, folding in on itself until only its luminous atmosphere remained, re-forming into a long waving tentacle whose tongue-like quality as it licked at the Titanic lent additional credence to the illusion of a half-eaten lollipop.

The spectacle was so hypnotic in its effect that it took longer than it might have done for Jim Kirk to realise what was likely to happen next.

"Uhura," he snapped suddenly. "Get me that Klingon."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"Kolyno'os. This is Captain James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise. You are standing into danger. I repeat, you are standing into danger."

"I'm getting no response, Captain. I don't think they're hearing us."

"Then they'd better start listening. Ah - !"

With a final silent slurp, the slavering tongue of ice-cold light polished off the shadowy Titanic and began to cast around for something more substantial. In the nick of time, the Klingon vessel opened up its main drive and began to accelerate out of range, only to be pulled up short like a dog straining at the leash. For half a minute or so it held its own, before being drawn inexorably back towards the visible manifestation of the white hole.

Chekov looked for some conflict of emotions on his Captain's face, but Kirk's decision had already been taken. "They're Klingons, Keptin. Enemies."

"They are also fellow space mariners, Mr. Chekov. Even if we were at war, which we're not, I would still try to help them. Tractor beams, Mr. Sulu. Scotty, prepare for full reverse thrust. Everything you've got - AND a bit more for luck."

"They wouldn't do it for us."

"Nor they would, Mr. Chekov. All the more reason to set them a good example. Full astern, Mr. Sulu. NOW".

Gradually, the two ships began to draw away from the danger zone. Then, quite suddenly, all resistance ceased. Caught off balance, the Enterprise gyrated wildly, as under the conflicting influences of two sets of engines, the invisibly linked ships changed course. Now it was the Enterprise which was nearer to the centre of

Attuclac's influence. To make matters worse, a second tongue was forming, coming up to meet the Enterprise, and right in her path.

"Now we'll see if you were right, Mr. Chekov," said Kirk grimly. "And rather sooner than I'd have liked!"

The Klingon's response was unexpected.

"They're pushing us forward," reported Scott, disgustedly. "The dirty - "

"It *is* illogical," mused D.S.O. Kinshaw. "If we go down, they go with us." She did a quick calculation. "Unless they're going to try to use our momentum to kick us clear."

"Cut tractor beam," ordered Kirk.

Before Sulu could comply, the order was countermanded over the hailing frequency.

"Wait. Captain, maintain tractor beam."

"It's Mr. Spock, Captain!" cried Uhura unnecessarily. "From the Kolyno'os."

"Good to see you, Mr. Spock," said Kirk, as Spock's face appeared on the main viewscreen. And, to the tall, round-shouldered figure beside him, "You too, Mr. Skunk. Or should I say Professor Moriarty?"

"Captain. This is vitally important, and there is not much time. Do you have anything, or anyone, of the planet aboard the Enterprise?"

"Bunions!" exclaimed Dr. McCoy, and, as Spock raised an eyebrow, "the little thief who stole our communicators."

"Then you must transport him back to the centre of the white hole. Immediately."

"Bones, have the patient taken back to the transporter room."

"No time for that, Captain. Even Spock sounded agitated. "I calculate that you have less than fifty seconds before impact. You'll have to beam him direct from sickbay."

"I'll do my best, sir." Scott was already furiously working out co-ordinates. "But it'll no' be easy."

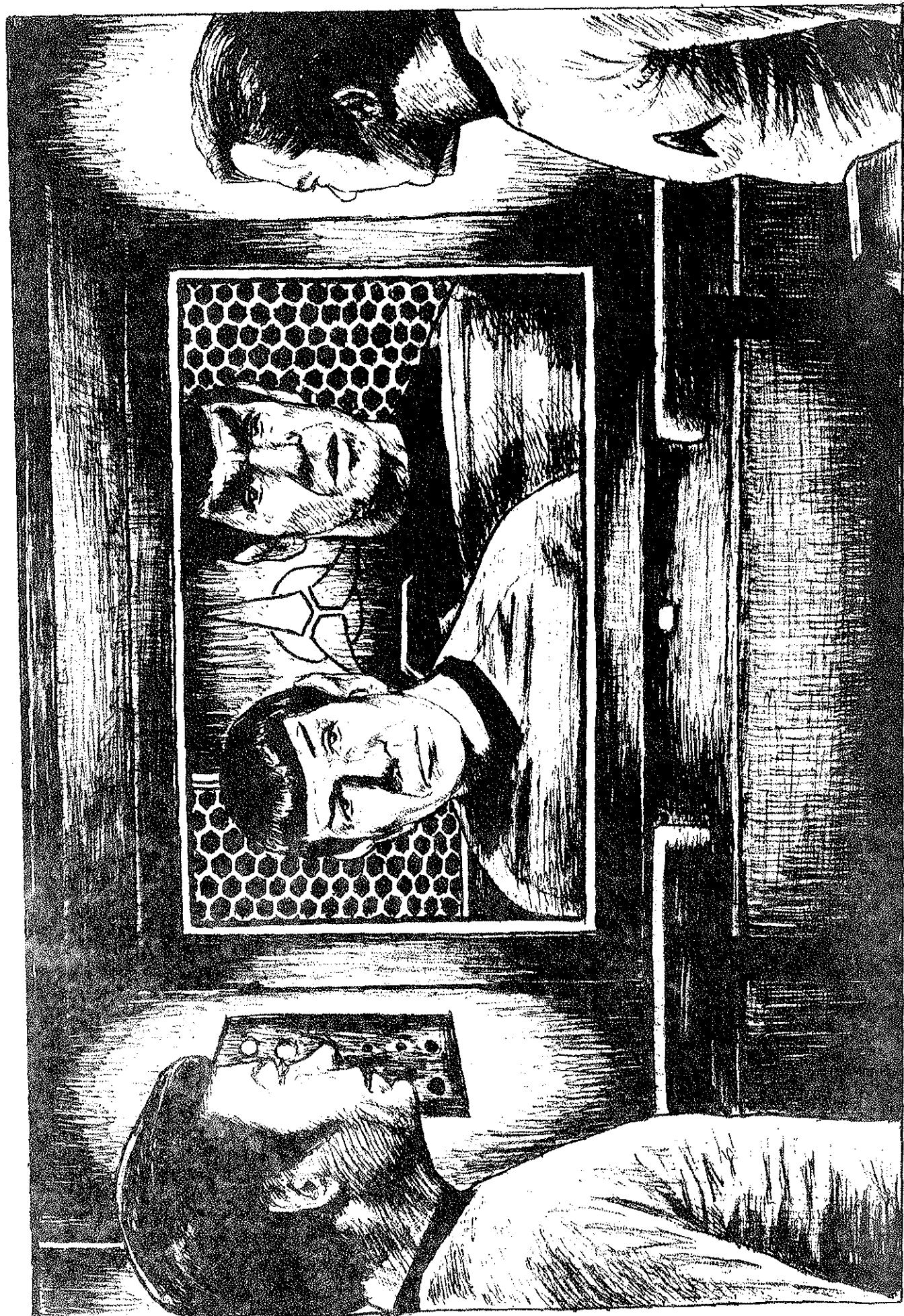
The seconds ticked away. The count, recorded aloud by Mr. Spock, had reached twenty-five before Scott reported, "Locked on, sir."

"Energise."

Nothing happened.

"Transporter malfunction. Fail-safe's blown, trying to pick something up from within the ship. It'll take half an hour to re-set itself. We've had it, Cap'n."

Spock said something to his cousin, who nodded and disappeared from view. Spock continued counting.



"Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four."

"SNAPPP!"

With the gravity-cushioning system inoperative, the whole ship was thrown into an orgy of confusion and mayhem as the Klingon transporter picked up the remains of Bunions from sickbay and hurled them towards the heart of the white hole. By the time order was re-established, the two ships, no longer linked, were travelling together at warp speed, leaving the twin tongues far behind, drooling helplessly over their lost supper.

"Thank you, Mr. Skunk. And please convey my thanks to your Captain."

The tall Klingon-Vulcan raised eyebrows even more interrogative than Spock's.

"I see no reason for thanks, Captain Kirk. When your transporter failed, the use of ours was the only possible recourse. As for Commander Kring - he knows nothing about it." Now it was Kirk's turn to look interrogative. "When Spock and I beamed up from the Falls of Reichenbach we already knew that we were faced with a deadly peril to both our ships, one which would require all of our combined mental resources to defeat it. Klingon military discipline is not conducive to individual thought. It was necessary for me to incapacitate the Commander and First Officer and assume command myself. Fortunately, Spock reminded me of the nerve pinch which, as a Klingon child, I was not encouraged to use. Spock administered it to the First Officer, I to the Commander, when no-one else was looking. My responsibilities as Science Officer include those of Senior Surgeon." (McCoy choked over his glass of Romulan brandy.) "I prescribed complete sedation for their sudden and unexpected collapse. They should wake up in three hours five minutes and... thirty one seconds."

"In that case," smiled Kirk, "you should have time to explain it all. From the beginning."

"The white hole has two ways of trapping its prey," Skunk began, when the various recorders had been set in motion. "The first being the physical manifestation of the planet. It builds almost instantaneously, from a combination of the substance of its most recent victims with enough of its own neutron matter locally released into the real universe - either this or the unknown 'A' universe depending upon the stage of its periodic cycle - to simulate planetary size and gravity."

"That was why we saw the Titanic as it began to withdraw?"

"Quite so, Captain." Spock took up the narrative. "We believe that the Titanic was caught in this manner. Her collision with the atmosphere was much more serious than ours, so there was time for only a handful of life-pods to be launched, Ram's being the only one to make it back to the regular trade routes.

"The second method is even more interesting. As part of the process of planetary genesis, the white hole emits some form of wave pattern, which performs an instantaneous scan of the approaching ship

or ships, enabling the planet to form itself into some close resemblance of their home world. Because we struck first, and because humanity is the dominant species aboard the Enterprise, the planet assumed a pseudo-terraform configuration.

"When the inevitable landing parties arrived, they would find themselves confronted with a familiar landscape, and placed in situations, real or fictional, culled from the memory banks of the hole's earlier victims. I think it highly probable that the crew of the Titanic included a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast. Had the Kolyno'os arrived first, we should no doubt have found ourselves participating in a sequence of events from Klingon mythology."

"Surely the two ships arrived together?"

"Not so, Captain Kirk. Our computer showed that the planet's appearance occurred some thirteen hours later in our time than it did in yours. Presumably the white hole is able to employ some form of time warp, in order to trap all potential victims simultaneously."

"But what was the point of all that Sherlock Holmes business?"

"Elementary, my dear Doctor. The point was to keep landing parties confused and guessing - the attempt to set 'Professor Moriarty' and 'Sherlock Holmes' at each others' throats was a master diversionary stroke - until some means could be found to infiltrate the mother ships. With us, it was even simpler. Our first landing party, composed of six of our finest security officers, was ambushed and wiped out."

"They would be," agreed D.S.O. Kinshaw sympathetically.

"The white hole having correctly read the Klingon mind, it knew that retribution would be inevitable. The next party was allowed to take prisoners.

"I, meanwhile, had prevailed upon Commander Kring to allow me to beam down alone, to make scientific observations. I found myself constantly addressed as 'Professor Moriarty', and whichever way I turned all roads seemed to lead to a place called 'Baker Street'."

"What they did not bargain for," said Spock, resuming his part of the narrative, "was any form of telepathic contact between their two principal victims. I, of course, sensed the presence of another Vulcan mind long before Mr. Skunk arrived at our lodgings."

"Then why that ridiculous business with the deerstalker?"

"Obviously, to warn him to conceal his identity by keeping his own hat on."

"But you knew his identity already. And so, I presume, did Mrs. Hudson."

"Really, Doctor. I cannot believe that even the fictional Dr. Watson can have been so obtuse. It was necessary to conceal Skunk's identity - from you. Had he not done so, you would never have accepted him as Professor Moriarty - I planned to denounce him as such whoever he claimed to be. I needed the supposed conflict between us to provide an excuse to meld minds. It was I who felled you with a nerve pinch, while loudly protesting that you had been struck down by a blow from the 'Professor'. It was while he was binding me to the chair that we were able to compare mental notes.

We found that we had independently come to the conclusion that we were dealing with a white hole, a phenomenon for which ample theoretical evidence existed but which had never previously been encountered in actuality. We agreed that our resources should be pooled in order to defeat the greater enemy, and since Skunk still had his communicator it was logical that we should beam up to the Kolyno'os. It only remained to arrange for Dr. McCoy to be returned to the Enterprise."

"The two jet aircraft?"

"Quite correct, Miss Kinshaw. I knew that you would be monitoring the surface closely and that such an anachronism could never remain undetected. I had already observed a high degree of flexibility in our surroundings. Garnered as it was from such a confused jumble of sources, the white hole's knowledge of nineteenth century Earth was, at best, garbled. So when Skunk and I separately demanded to be flown to our preordained rendezvous in Switzerland, ticket, aircraft, airports and several hundred fellow passengers were provided without question."

"What I don't understand is why it was necessary to put agents aboard our ships in the first place."

"Neither did I, Mr. - er - Sulu," said Skunk. "Until it was almost too late. Spock, of course, had no way of knowing about your visitor, and although I fully expected our prisoners to have been tortured to death - a practice which as a part-Klingon I am forced to condone but cannot be forced to approve - I assumed that their bodies would have been disposed of. It was only when our combined engines failed to overcome the planet's gravity that we realised that there must be material aboard with such an affinity for the white hole that no force in two universes could stop them being reunited. Then, when we had beamed the bodies off our ship, it became obvious that the Enterprise was also affected. The rest you know."

"Sure you won't change your mind, Mr. Skunk?" said Kirk as the tall stooping figure stepped onto the transporter pad. "We could always use another Deputy Science Officer." He winked at D.S.O. Kinshaw. "If only to keep this one from unauthorised tinkering with the computer."

"Thank you, Captain Kirk. But no. It grieves me to say it, knowing the brutalities of which my people are capable, but there is more of Klingon in my genes than my Vulcan self wishes to acknowledge. Just as Spock is more Human than he would ever admit to your Dr. Bones." He held out his hand. Kirk took it, knowing that by overcoming the Vulcan aversion to direct contact Skunk was paying him a singular compliment. Then he stepped back, out of the transporter.

"Energise."

"Live long and prosper, Skunk." Spock gave the age-old Vulcan farewell.

And from the shimmering form above the pad came the answering echo.

"Live long and prosper."

# THROUGH A GLASS LIGHTLY

## THE SUMMONS

Captain's Log Stardate 6070.2

The Enterprise has been ordered to report to Starbase XIII for debriefing, following the successful investigation into the Attuclac White Hole mystery. Starbase is now within scanner range and the Communications Officer reports that another starship is already docked.

The ship is a Klingon.

The young Russian's expression was even gloomier than usual. "I don't like it, Keptin."

"Neither do I, Mr. Chekov. But we have our orders."

James Kirk had beamed across to Starbase XIII a deeply puzzled man. He returned a furiously angry one.

Despite Starbase's assurances that the beautiful Klingon ship was there by invitation, he had felt it necessary to leave the Enterprise with her shields fully extended. She had, it was true, destroyed this ship's twin sister some months earlier, in an engagement off the planet Hendau IV, but not before she had felt the mighty destructive power of the Klingons' new Amaser armaments. Kirk also thought it prudent to take with him a strong Security detachment. Now he stabbed savagely at the main intercom button, in a quite uncharacteristic display of temper.

"Kirk to all decks. Now hear this. All ship's officers report to number two briefing room. On the double. Kirk out."

When told the news, the offers were frankly incredulous, from First Officer Spock right down to the most junior ensign, Potato, of Security.

"Let me get this straight, Cap'n." Lieutenant Commander Scott's tone suggested that his Captain had just donned a Santa Claus outfit and instructed the Chief Engineer to replace the main warp drive with a team of reindeer. "We're going back to the White Hole. In company with yon shipload of thugs. To try to penetrate through the hole and come out the other side?" Kirk nodded. "And the Klingon ship is going to be in command?"

"That's about the size of it, Scotty."

In her six months aboard the Enterprise, Deputy Science Officer Kinshaw had become almost as expert as her Vulcan chief at reading their Captain's thoughts. "That's not all, though, sir, is it?"

"Not by a long way, Miss Kinshaw. The Captain of the Kuba'al -

that is the name of our new consort, by the way - has been relieved by a commodore. One we know well."

"Not Kang?"

"No, Lieutenant, not Kang." (Uhura looked faintly disappointed.) "I wish it were. Within the limits of his own code, Kang is a man of honour. No, our new commodore is - Commodore Lung."

There was a stunned silence. Everybody present vividly remembered the handsome, vain psychopath who had treacherously taken Scott and D.S.O. Kinshaw hostage while sending two deadly androids created in his own image to capture the Enterprise, all while the Enterprise and his own ship, the Krayda'ak, had been sworn to observe a truce\*. The man who had discarded his given name, Keth, adopting instead his own chosen soubriquet: Lung - The Fiend.

As for the entry of the Demon King, the Engineering intercom shrilled.

"Captain. There's a Klingon officer beamed aboard. And two - three - no, four enlisted men. With a... thing. They claim that they're expected."

"That's all right, Mr. Kyle. They're rather early, but they are expected. Mr. Potato, you are excused. Take a detachment and escort Commodore Lung and his party here. With all due courtesy."

"That means clap them in irons," muttered Sulu, but Kirk quelled him with a glance.

"Why him, of all people, Captain?" asked Uhura when Potato had left. "Lung, I mean."

"Can't we get the decision overruled, Jim? Just because Starfleet have gone out of their minds, it doesn't follow that the whole Federation - "

"Not a chance, Bones. The order came from the very top."

"From my father, as it happens," added Spock. "On behalf of the Vulcan government. Undoubtedly there is a good reason - although I confess I cannot myself see the logic at present."

Despite the situation, McCoy could not prevent a broad smile breaking out on his craggy features. "Mr. Spock! Did I hear right? Are you really implying that the Vulcan Government is illogical?"

"Not at all, Doctor. You may infer only that there must be facts of which we are not in possession."

There was a stir at the back of the room. The doors opened, admitting a tall Klingon, with unusually fair hair and skin, whose chilling ice-blue eyes seemed to send the briefing room temperature plummetting. In his left hand he carried a long, shining, slightly flexible implement which looked like a three-way cross between a riding whip, a swagger-stick and a dagger. With it, he pointed to a space on the briefing room floor.

"There."

\*Footnote: See 'The Serpents of Paxo Beta, Enterprise - Log Entries 66'

The four Klingons staggering behind him under the weight of a huge covered tray began to lower their burden.

"Carefully, or I'll flay you alive, myself."

Satisfied, Lung turned to face Kirk. Saluted and bowed, formally, but with just enough mockery to be insulting.

"Ah, Kirk. Still a Captain, I see. In the Klingon navy we get what we deserve."

"Why didn't you, then?" muttered Chekov, mutinously and just a trifle too loudly.

"Be silent, pig!" The nearest of the four Klingon heavies started towards him, but stopped in his tracks as a flick from Lung's whip removed a quarter-inch strip of skin from the side of his face.

"Remember we are guests on this ship. For the moment."

"And I'll trouble you to remember that too, Mr. Chekov," said Kirk sternly, adding, "all of it."

"Will you present me to your officers, Captain?"

"Certainly, Commodore. My First Officer and Science Officer, Commander Spock. Lieutenant Commander Scott, Chief Engineer. Senior Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy." Kirk led the way round the assembled ranks. Lung followed silently, slapping his swagger dagger gently against his left leg. "And this is Mr. Spock's principal assistant, Miss Kinshaw."

"Ah, yes. Miss Kinshaw. We have met before. Some day I shall know."

"Know, sir?"

"Some day I shall know how you and Mr. Scott escaped from my brig on the Krayda'ak. Some day." He looked her up and down for a long moment, until she felt stripped naked under the gaze of those terrible eyes.

"I think he fancies her," whispered Sulu to Chekov, only to be visually stripped in his turn.

"Perhaps he's AC/DC," Chekov whispered back, but not until Lung was safely out of earshot.

Tired of play-acting, Lung became businesslike. He turned and marched to the lectern, taking up his position behind it.

And spoke one word. "Begin."

One of his henchmen whipped the cover from the tray on the floor, revealing a group of artefacts carved in a pure white crystalline stone. Seven were in the forms of figurines. There was a centaur-like creature with two forked tails; two birds, one with a cruelly serrated beak, the other being depicted in the process of laying an egg at least twice its own size and wearing a slightly pained expression on its almost humanoid face; a female figure, vaguely humanoid and more than vaguely pregnant; a seven-pronged starfish with an evil multi-fanged mouth and a sword at the end of each limb; a blind reptile with an eye in a most unlikely position at

the base it its tail; finally, the largest of all, a crowned male figure, well endowed, carrying two orbs in one hand and a most suggestively shaped sceptre in the other. All these, under Lung's direction, were carried to predetermined points in the room. From the exactitude he demanded with regard to their positioning, it was obvious that the entire proceeding had been most carefully rehearsed. He even went so far as to lash one of his men for placing the centaur next to the computer's visual display unit rather than on top of it.

Satisfied at last, Lung turned to face Spock. "Well, Mr. Spock, what does your highly over-rated logic say to you?"

Dr. McCoy, leaping to his friend's defence, said, "Logic is the mark of a trained and civilised mind. Something you wouldn't know about. Sir."

"Why, thank you, Doctor." Spock permitted himself a half smile. "But there is no need. Sound logic is its own defence."

He turned back to Lung.

"Clearly these are representations of a hitherto unknown classical mythology. We see a king of the gods, an earth mother, a god of war and several minor deities. The significance of the reptile's eye eludes me - " (*The mind boggles*, Uhura and D.S.O. Kinshaw agreed between themselves) - "but the collection as a whole may represent... Ah, yes." He broke off, as two of the Klingons advanced towards him bearing the eighth carving. This was larger than the rest and was in the form of a hollow head, faceless except for two large empty eye-holes and covered with what might have been thick spiky hair. "As I thought."

To the consternation of his fellow officers, Spock was pulled roughly to his feet, while at the same time the hollow head was fitted grotesquely over his own.

"Please do not trouble yourself, Captain." Spock had sensed the beginnings of an angry movement and his voice boomed hollowly from inside the head. "If my calculations are correct, the arrangement is entirely logical."

The intercom shrilled a second time.

"Captain!" This time Kyle sounded as though nothing would ever surprise him again. "Ambassador Sarek is here. With three Vulcans and another... object. He wants to know if - " Kyle lowered his voice and now the disbelief was plain for all to hear - "if Commodore Lung is ready for him."

The disbelief was understandable. Sarek was one of the most respected and influential of Vulcans; the implication that he too was to be considered subordinate to the swaggering figure on the dais was unthinkable.

Lung leaned towards the intercom.

"Speak up, Mr. Kyle. I can hear you perfectly, but there are others present." And, as Kyle did not reply, "Come up, Vulcan. All is prepared."

The three Vulcans who accompanied Sarek into the briefing room were even more heavily laden than Lung's party. They carried a triangular cradle on which sat a gigantic partial ovoid, shaped like a boiled egg with the top taken off. Even poised vertically it barely passed through the doors. It was a truly remarkable object - except that nobody in the room was looking at it. For, the moment it was set down on the floor at a location carefully measured out and indicated by Sarek, things began to happen.

The faceless head lifted itself from Spock's shoulders and, after seeming to hesitate for a few moments, settled into a hover about eighteen inches above him.

If Sarek was surprised at the sudden emergence of his son, he gave no sign of it. The two exchanged formal Vulcan salutes, then Spock, having satisfied himself that the beautifully crafted object was not about to go crashing to the floor, stepped out from under it and took his place beside Kirk at the conference table.

One by one the other white artefacts came to life; first lifting themselves into the air, then starting to circle the central head, anti-clockwise except for the Eye-tailed Reptile, which moved clockwise, and the Earth Mother which travelled in an eccentric perpendicular plane crossing the orbits of the King and the Straining Bird.

The word 'orbits' struck a chord.

"It's an orrery!" exclaimed D.S.O. Kinshaw.

"Just so, Miss Kinshaw. It occurred to me that allowing for the projected ellipsis of the outermost orbit, I was situated at the optimum location of the system's focal point."

"Where the sun ought to be," explained Lung to his henchmen, who were looking mystified.

"I believe Mr. Spock said that, Commodore," hissed McCoy.

"Clearly," Spock continued, "the device needed to be located some six feet from the floor before the demonstration would function." He turned to Lung. "Thank you, Commodore. Most - illuminating."

Lung, somewhat taken aback at being thanked for what had been intended as a calculated insult, said nothing. He did not have to, for the demonstration had scarcely begun.

Slowly and ponderously, the broken egg lifted itself from its cradle. As it did so, it began to change colour, assuming the silver-blue of the briefing-room walls. Once the gaping black maw turned to the wall, the camouflage was complete; to all intents and purposes the thing was invisible.

Then it started moving, spinning slowly on its axis and at the same time adopting a pendulum-like motion, to and fro among the circling planets. As it moved, it changed colour continuously, from silver-blue to black and back again, so that it was sometimes visible, sometimes not.

"Interesting," mused Spock, half to himself, half to Kirk.

"Mr. Spock?"

"Observe the periodicity of visibility, Captain. Particularly with relation to the Earth Mother planet."

"About one in two?"

"Point five six two five, to be exact, Captain. Or as close to exact as I can calculate. To put it simply, if the Earth Mother is considered analogous to your own planet, then the time of maximum visibility of the black object occurs every 6.5 to 7 months."

"But that was - "

"Affirmative, Captain. The exact periodicity of Attuclac - the White Hole."

Confirmation came almost at once.

With each successive oscillation, the great black egg had come closer to the orbit of the Serrated Bird. Twice they almost touched, but the Hole had been invisible and the two objects ignored each other. The third time it was at maximum blackness. The Serrated Bird stopped in its tracks, standing still like a snake's mesmerised prey awaiting the strike. Almost nonchalantly, the hole engulfed it, proceeding on its way as though nothing had happened. And the orbiting planets were reduced to six.

The Centaur was the next to go, gobbled up on the Hole's very next manifestation. There followed a long period of waiting as it jockeyed for position with the second of the birds. Eventually, it too was devoured, followed quickly by the War God and, a few oscillations later, the King.

Now only the Eye-tailed Reptile and the Earth Mother remained. Which would be next? The suspense in the room was almost tangible as the silent drama unfolded; only Lung and the Vulcans remained impassive as first the Earth Mother and then the Reptile narrowly escaped the fate of the others.

"It's the Earth Mother!" Ensign Potato, in his excitement, was giving a running commentary. "It'll get her this time for sure." And so it would have done, had not the Hole's trajectory on that particular pass taken it close to the Sun for the first time. It actually turned to its left, 'looking' straight at the Sun with its evil black opening. From that moment, it abandoned all attempts to trap either planet; now it was stalking bigger game.

"Four more oscillations will do it, Jim," calculated Spock.

Sure enough, as the two bodies closed on each other, the Hole began darkening. The doomed Sun rushed headlong to within a foot of the gaping black maw.

And everything stopped.

There was a collective sigh, of much breath held for too long.

"Time is short, Commodore," observed Sarek. Lung nodded, as Sarek explained, "When the Klingons first discovered the orrery and brought it to us, the Sun and Hole were stopping one and a half

metres apart. Every subsequent occasion on which it has been operated has seen the gap narrow."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. - er - Sulu."

"Did you say the Klingons took the orrery to Vulcan?"

"That is so. In the Klingon code, avenging a blood brother overrides all other considerations. We now know that three Klingon vessels were destroyed by the Hole, not two as was first thought. The Hole's first victim was the Klingon liner Ko'oth Rain. Among its passengers were Kramm and his whole family. As you may know, Kramm was heir presumptive to the Klingon Empire - and as such, a blood brother to the entire ruling hierarchy."

"But Kramm was killed in a hunting accident."

"A blind only, Captain Kirk." Lung came in before Sarek could reply. "Put about until the deaths could be avenged. The finest Klingon ships, under our most formidable commanders, were sent to find out what had happened and to wreak havoc upon the killer. Two, as you know, were lost. The third brought back the orrery. When our scientists failed to explain its purpose, The Klingon ordered it taken to Vulcan under a flag of truce.

"It's a warning!" The sepulchral tones of Ensign Potato at his most doom-laden echoed round the room. "The Earth is going to be destroyed."

"No, Ensign." Sarek had never met Potato, but the insignia of an Ensign in Security was familiar enough. "That was our first thought, but we were wrong. The orrery is not a warning. It is a cry for help."

"How can you be sure, sir?" asked D.S.O. Kinshaw.

"Because, quite simply, the material of which it is made is not... of our universe. When the Enterprise and the Kolyno'os reported their findings - that the culprit was that theoretically possible but never previously encountered phenomenon, a white hole - the last piece of the puzzle fell into place."

Sarek paused, as if to collect his thoughts. His stern, unsmiling features assumed an air of even greater gravity. "Some of you may be asking, 'What concern is it of ours?'" Chekov and one or two others were seen nodding to themselves. "A white hole, as I am sure you know, is an imperfect black hole drawing its energy and substance from two co-axial universes, though existing in neither. It is at this moment in the process of destroying a complete solar system. Our scientists have calculated that system's sun to be at least as large as your own. Ingestion of a star of that magnitude would stabilize the so-called 'Attuclac' into a mature black hole - and a stabilised black hole at the exact conjunction of two discrete universes would cause a cataclysmic imbalance of the entire space-time infrastructure.

"This must not be allowed to happen."

"Urgent consultations emphasised the need for a joint Klingon-Federation expedition, because each culture has vital technical capabilities the other lacks. Vulcan's scientists also

considered with the utmost care who would be the logical choice to command it. The unanimous decision was to request the services of Commander - now Commodore - Lung." (Lung could be seen with a smirk on his face, practically preening himself.)

"And now, if there are no more questions - ?"

"Just one, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Kinshaw?"

"Those materials. The pure white stone and the stuff that changes colour. What exactly are they?"

"There is only one material. Even the 'hole' is constructed of it. White is its natural colour - the silver-to-black colour change is merely an ingenious optical illusion."

"And the white stone?"

Sarek raised an eyebrow quizzically, as if to say that she might have observed that for herself. For a moment he looked exactly like Spock. Then he replied,

"Coal, Miss Kinshaw. Coal."

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Riley. Ahead warp factor three. Assume station abaft and to starboard of the Kuba'al."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Mr. Le Cou."

The tall blond French Canadian with the long thin neck snapped to attention, sitting bolt upright in the navigator's seat. "Sir."

"Plot a course for Attuclac and have the computer monitor it. I want to know if the Kuba'al deviates from it by so much as a microsecond."

Kirk stifled a yawn as a sudden wave of tiredness almost overcame him. Since the moment nineteen days earlier when the Enterprise had first struck the atmosphere of the pseudo-planet, constructed by the white hole in order to ensnare passing ships, he had averaged only four hours' sleep per day, much of that snatched in the command chair in the form of catnaps.

The bridge doors opened and closed.

"Jim, we need to talk."

Kirk drew a weary hand across his forehead. "What is it, Bones? Can't it wait?"

The gesture had not been lost on McCoy. "No, Jim, I don't believe it can. Why are Sulu and Chekov not at their posts?"

"Oh, for - " Kirk bit off the angry response, another sure sign that fatigue was getting the better of him.

"And Uhura," McCoy went on remorselessly. "I see Ensign Pawson

standing in for her. And the science station isn't manned at all."

"Sit down, Bones." The nearest seat was the command chair. McCoy sat down in it. "In a little under twelve hours this ship will be facing unimaginable dangers. We have to penetrate through an unstable, and hungry, black hole, in the company of a superb fighting vessel belonging to a sworn enemy, under the command of a man I wouldn't trust an inch even if he were on our side. As if that wasn't enough, we depend on that ship for our means of penetrating the hole."

McCoy lifted his eyebrows Spock-wise, but said nothing.

"If we survive that far, we may well find ourselves in a universe so alien as to be beyond our comprehension. Vulcan scientists have calculated that we will have less than five weeks to comprehend it - then we must find a way to save two universes from annihilation. For all that, I need my First Team - alert, rested and raring to go."

McCoy leaned back in the command chair. It fitted rather well. Carefully, he composed his voice into the southern drawl he used when dispensing homespun philosophy to those patients who came seeking counsel rather than medical advice.

"Seems to me, Jim, that the First Team isn't much good without its Captain."

"That would seem logical, Doctor."

McCoy turned with a start to the empty science station, from whence the computer had spoken, its own metallic tones coloured with an inflection that was pure Spock.

"Is that damn thing trying to be funny?"

"Excusez-moi." Le Cou spoke from the navigation console without looking up. "Je crois que c'est SKip."

"In English, please, Lieutenant." The French Canadian spoke quite adequate English, but tended to 'forget' the fact if he thought he could get away with it.

"Eet is a project zat m'sieu Spock set for mam'zelle Keenshaw, mon capitaine."

"Do you know anything about this, Mr. Riley?"

"I think it's called 'Spock and Kinshaw Interchange Program' sir. SKip for short. Mr. Spock was concerned that there might be too little true logic applied to the interpretation of scientific data when he was off ship, so he set Chin - sorry, sir, I mean Miss Kinshaw - to write a program to make the computer think like him, sir."

Fatigued as he was, Kirk could not help smiling. "And the K?"

"Miss Kinshaw said that logic was all right in its place, but you could have too much of a good thing. She's trying to get the computer to think like either one of them." Riley lowered his voice, as if he expected pointed ears to be eavesdropping. "I don't think Mr. Spock knows about that, sir."



"There we are, then." McCoy beamed triumphantly. "Two science officers on the bridge at once. The ship's in good hands, so you can rest easy, Jim."

"Beg pardon, sir, but the program's not finished yet. It can't think for itself - not without building in M5-type problems - and she didn't think you'd want those."

"We do not," agreed Kirk, with feeling.

"No problem, Jim. I'll take the conn myself. I've done it before."

"I'm a doctor, not a starship driver," misquoted Kirk.

"I'm glad you reminded me, Jim. This is a medical emergency. Go get some rest, Captain." And, as Kirk opened his mouth to protest, "That's an order, Jim."

The two ships sped onwards. Aboard the Enterprise lights were dimmed as the ship went on night-time status to encourage her crew to get some sleep.

"You know, I think I could get to like this!" McCoy tilted Kirk's chair back as far as it would go. "A helmsman and navigator to do all the hard work. A nice comfortable chair to take the weight off my feet. And no risk of some grubby little spaceman wanting me to admire his piles."

"Too much sitting down is a common cause of that condition, Doctor."

McCoy glared at the computer's speaker. "Any more cracks like that and I'll order your plug pulled out." But he stood up all the same, intent upon taking a turn around the bridge, to keep the circulation going.

"Sir!" Riley was suddenly alert. "Kuba'al's increasing speed. Warp four. Five. Six."

"Stay with her, Mister," ordered McCoy. "Computer, how's his heading?"

"Dead on course, Doctor."

"Warp seven, sir." A note of alarm crept into Riley's voice, which began sounding very Irish. "Eight. Nine."

"What's the matter, Kirk?" Lung, a sardonic smile on his face, appeared on the main viewscreen. "Can't you maintain a simple formation?"

Ensign Pawson looked round from the communications station. "Shall I open a hailing frequency, sir?"

"Tell him to go jump - " began McCoy, but the computer's Spock persona interrupted him.

"Negative, Ensign. The logical course would be to deny him certain pertinent information of which he is evidently not in possession."

"Which is?" McCoy could not help asking.

"Obviously, that the Enterprise has no senior command grade officer on the bridge."

McCoy spluttered, but sat down again. Suddenly he was no longer enjoying himself.

"Warp ten," reported Riley. "Eleven. Twelve. Bejesus - warp thirteen!"

"She'll blow soon," warned the computer. "Doctor, it would appear that he is trying to destroy us. All available data force me to recommend breaking formation and alerting the Captain."

"Wait." The computer continued speaking, but in a different voice; one which was in some indefinable way more feminine. "He's just bluffing. Trying to make us show weakness."

"An interesting hypothesis, Miss Kinshaw. Please explain."

"Is this a private conversation, or can anybody join in?" snapped McCoy. Both halves of the Skip program ignored him.

"There's an awful lot of interest in this mission. Lung must know that our progress will be monitored. He won't try anything while we're still in communications range."

"Good thinking, Miss Kinshaw. And quite correct. Sensors have just detected the Kuba'al scanning our molecular structure. I am intercepting their report. It states that we can safely go to -"

"Warp fourteen," gulped Riley.

The Engineering intercom shrilled. "That's all we've got, sir. If you want any more I'll have to call Mr. Scott."

"Thank you, Mr. Kyle. Well, Mr. Skip, or whatever you call yourself. What do we do now?"

"The logical course would be force him to slow down," said Skip-Spock.

"Or get him to give us a tow," added Skip-Kinshaw.

"Brilliant!" McCoy could not help exclaiming. Two conclusions had been reached, by different thought processes. And both were right. "Mr. Riley, can we get a tractor beam on him?"

Riley broke into what had come to be known as his 'take you home Kathleen' smile. "To be sure we can, Doctor."

Within minutes of the tractor beam making contact, the Kuba'al had slowed down to an altogether more sensible speed.

"Congratulations, Kirk." The hailing frequency from the Klingon was still operating in one-way mode. "You passed my little test." Only the sharpest of hearing aboard the Enterprise heard him add maliciously, "Just."

When Captain Kirk relieved his temporary stand-in some hours later, it was as if nothing untoward had happened.

"How'd you get on, Bones?"

"Fine, Jim, fine."

"No problems at all?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle. I'd say we managed very well." Dr. McCoy caught Riley's eye and glanced involuntarily at the computer. "Between us."

"You think he should have roused me, don't you, Spock?"

"Not at all, Captain. The Doctor and I have our differences, but he is well used to taking decisions - even if they are sometimes based on pure emotion. And on this occasion he had the best of advice. In duplicate, in fact."

"You knew?"

"That Miss Kinshaw had programmed her own deductive processes as well as mine? No, but I would have expected no less." And as Kirk looked baffled, "Humans may be illogical, Captain, but they are... predictable."

"And you don't mind?"

"Captain, you never seem to tire of hearing me say that Vulcans have no feelings to hurt. I am, however... concerned... that the program's reasoning may still be too... superficial."

"How so?"

"Both parts of the system agreed that Lung will make no attempt to destroy us while we remain in contact with Starbase. But neither thought the matter through to its logical conclusion. Once we penetrate the white hole, then that contact will be lost."

He paused. Captain and First Officer looked at one another grimly. And nodded.

"THEN he'll try something!"

Parsec Bermuda, as the hunting ground of Attuclac the White Hole had come to be known, was empty. Not so much as a speck of stellar dust had been left by the hidden scavenger who pounced from an unknown dimension once every six and a half months. At the precise location where the hole's pseudo planet had so nearly destroyed the Enterprise, Lung called a halt. The two ships hung motionless in space, both crews tense and expectant, waiting for something to happen.

"Keptin?"

"Yes, Mr. Chekov?"

"Isn't this where - ?"

Kirk nodded. "Right first time."

"Then oughtn't we - ?"

Chekov was not the only one wondering that. Memories aboard the Enterprise were still vivid with the recollection of that grim tug-o'-war against Attuclac, with life or death as the prize.

"Relax, Mr. Chekov. The hole is well into its return cycle. There's no way it can get at us now. Isn't that so, Mr. Spock?"

"Quite so, Captain. Furthermore, Vulcan scientists have calculated that the presence of a major star so close to its interface with the other universe will have the effect of creating a spatio-temporal ellipse. The hole's influence will be directed away from us for five months, three days, twenty one hours and - "

"Unless it consumes the star first."

"I was about to say that, Doctor. In that event, the forces unleashed upon the cosmos would render any considerations of whether or not we were within its range - immaterial."

"Excuse me, Mr. Spock?" Sulu looked up thoughtfully from his helm display. "If the hole can't get at us, how can we get at it? To pass through into the other universe?"

"An excellent question, Mr. Sulu. And one to which we should have the answer at any moment."

"Hangar deck to bridge."

"Spock here, Mr. Potato. You have an unmanned shuttlecraft attempting to gain entry. Probably bearing the name Columbia."

"Yes, Mr. Spock. But - how did yez know?"

Kirk swung into action. "Let it aboard, Ensign. Lt. Uhura, please inform the Commodore that the equipment has arrived. It will be operational in thirty minutes. Mr. Potato, have four strong men report to the hangar deck. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, come with me. You, too, Mr. Chekov. No, on second thoughts, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Chekov, you have the conn. It will be good practice for you."

The crate was built of a heavy reinforced plastic material. From it emerged an assortment of wires and tubes, the biggest of which led upwards to a clear plastic reservoir containing a liquid closely resembling diluted blood. A second reservoir, whose fluid was similar but had a bluish tinge, was slung beneath the crate; this one was made of a soft material and was pulsating horribly.

"Sorry about this, Scotty," said Kirk, as the four panting Security guards lowered the crate gently to the floor. "There was nowhere else big enough. Is that medical equipment there yet?"

"Coming, Captain." Nurse Chapel appeared in the doorway, carrying clamps and a tall stand. Two orderlies followed, wheeling a mobile life support system. While Christine Chapel fixed up the stand and carefully suspended the main fluid reservoir from it, Spock expertly unfastened the crate and lowered its sides.

"Wha' in the name of my Aunt Nessie?"

Scott wasn't the only one staring. And with good reason. The thing which stood revealed was pink and obscenely bloated, with a pronounced cleavage down one side. Freed from the constraints of its container it quickly swelled to twice its original size.

Ensign Potato, for one, had no doubts.

"It's a bum!" he declared. "So it is."

It certainly looked very much like one, although its owner could have claimed galactic records for the worst case of varicose veins in the most inconvenient of places.

"Wrong end, Ensign," smiled Kirk, mentally congratulating himself on his decision to leave Chekov on the bridge.

"It's a head?"

"Got it in two, Mr. Potato. The Great Head of Talos. Propelled here at warp speeds in a sub-warp craft by the power of pure thought. Are we nearly ready, Mr. Spock?"

"Two minutes, Captain." While McCoy and his team had been connecting the head to the life support system, Spock and the D.S.O. had been busy improvising leads to it from every spare computer outlet.

"That is the last." Spock straightened up. "Computer."

"Ready."

"This peripheral is to be given access to all ship's information banks. Priority grade one, subject only to vocal override from the Bridge or Engineering.

"Check."

"On no, repeat no account will you accept instructions from it."

"Check."

"Confirm operational status."

"Peripheral fully operational - now."

Jim Kirk looked up inquiringly. "Is that it, Mr. Spock?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Then we're ready. Kirk to Bridge."

"Bridge here, sir."

"Notify the Kuba'al. Stand by to go to condition red. Activating in one minute. I'm on my way. Kirk out." And to the others around him in Engineering, "Let's go, gentlemen."

Lung was waiting on the viewscreen as Kirk entered the Bridge. Even his face showed signs of tension.

"Ready, Kirk?"

"Ready, Commodore."

"Then activate your device. And follow me."

Even as Lung spoke, the universe dissolved into fire. Dead ahead of the two ships, a cosmic explosion of supernova proportions was rushing out of space to meet them.

"We're too late, Captain," gasped Uhura. "The hole must have swallowed the star already. The cosmos is tearing itself apart!"

It certainly looked very much like it, although one person who clearly didn't think so was Lung. With a cry which must have been the Klingon equivalent of "Geronimo!" he gunned the Kuba'al's sub-warp drive. The giant ship leaped forwards, like an eager charger unexpectedly given its head.

"He's gone mad!" exclaimed Chekov, adding darkly, "if he wasn't already."

But if Lung had gone mad, he was not alone. Kirk, too, began rapping out orders.

"Captain to Engineering. Maximum power to impulse drive. Full ahead, Mr. Sulu."

Disciplined as he was, the helmsman could not help looking up questioningly. "Full - ahead - sir?"

"You heard me."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sulu shrugged resignedly and opened up the throttles. The Enterprise surged ahead, towards the onrushing holocaust.

#### INTO THE WHITE

Captain's Log Stardate 6074.4

The Enterprise and the Klingon Battleship Huba'al have been despatched on a joint mission under the command of the Klingon Commodore Lung. Our objective: to penetrate the white hole 'Attuciac' and to prevent it from destroying an alien sun. Such destruction, were it allowed to take place, could have a cataclysmic effect on the whole space-time fabric.

Also on board the Enterprise, for an as yet undisclosed purpose, is the gigantic humanoid brain known as the Great Head of Tatos.

#### ||||FLASH||| Navigation Log

Although no star system exists within light-years of our position, the Enterprise and Huba'al are confronted with a supernova explosion, directly in our path.

"Ninety thousand kilometres to contact, sir. Closing fast."

"Hold that course, helmsman. That's an order."

Kirk shot an angry glance at the viewscreen, where Lung had briefly appeared. "I am quite capable of commanding my own ship, Commodore."

"See that you do."

Lung's sneering reply was scarcely out of his mouth before his picture disappeared, along with the terrifying vision of hell unleashed and even the viewscreen itself. Their place was taken by a cloudy three-dimensional image, which swiftly formed itself into that of a cruelly disfigured man, the lower half of whose body was encased in a kind of wrap-around wheelchair. This in turn dissolved into a vision of a tall man of about Kirk's age, dressed in Starfleet uniform. The former Captain of the Enterprise had come home.

"Chris." Spock straightened up in greeting. "How are you?"

"Fine, Mr. Spock. Fine. But you realise that what you see before you is illusion only, projected by the Head of Talos?" Then the image of Captain Pike smiled disarmingly. "Sorry, Spock. That would be the logical deduction, and of course you would have made it."

"Can the real - can you - I mean - " Uhura halted, covered with confusion.

"I know what you mean, Lieutenant. No, I am pure illusion. But the Head of Talos speaks through me as Christopher Pike and, knowing him totally, speaks as would Christopher Pike. Furthermore, when this mission is completed and the head is returned to Talos, he will be enabled to live this experience for himself."

"Good to see you anyway, Chris."

"Thank you, Jim. How long do I have?"

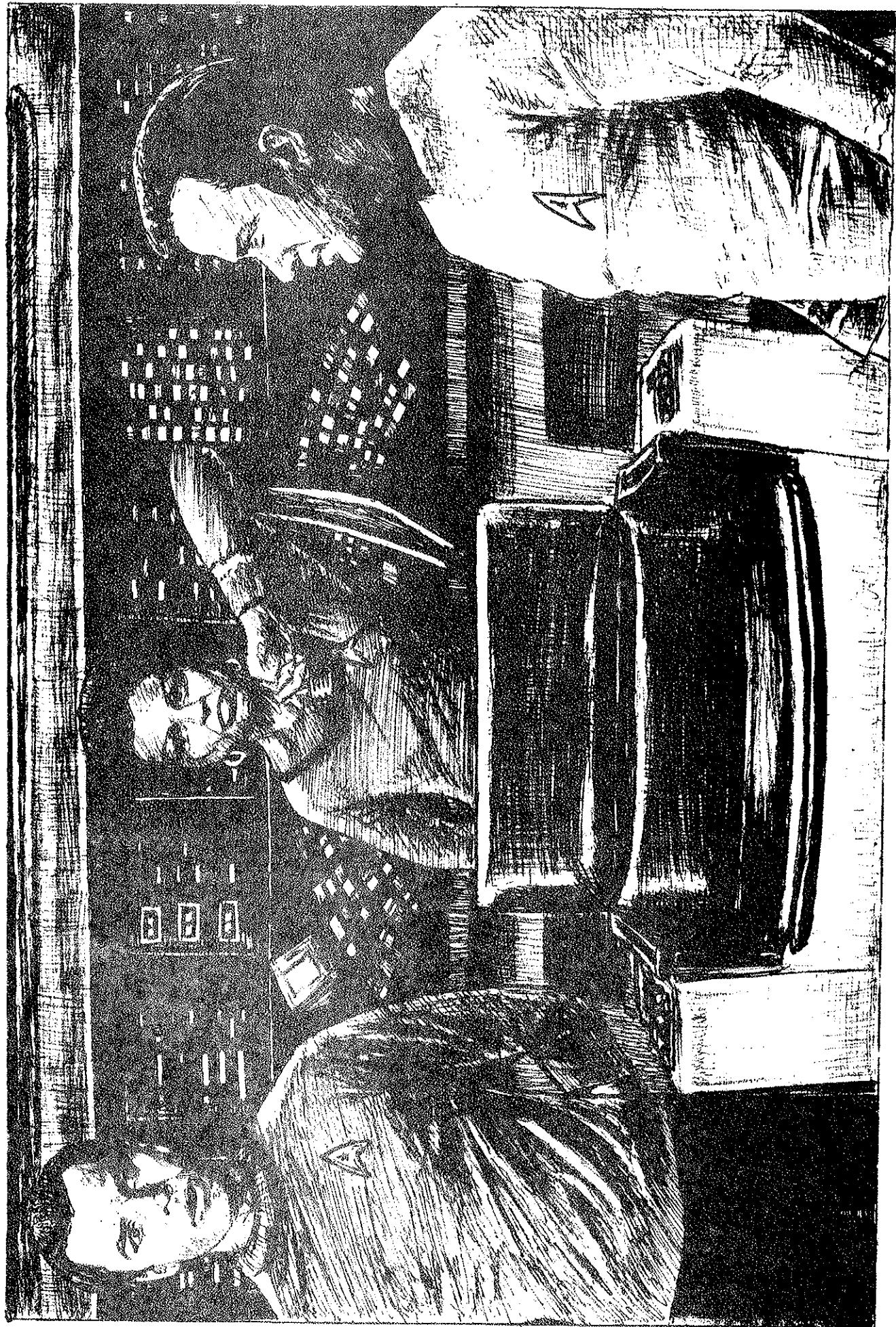
"About four minutes, we think."

"Three minutes and fifty four seconds, to be exact."

"'Approximate' as ever, Mr. Spock! O.K., let's get started. Lieutenant, can you give me Bridge to all decks."

Uhura glanced at Kirk - he was the Captain of the Enterprise now - who nodded. She opened the channels.

"Now hear this. This is Captain Christopher Pike, formerly of the U.S.S. Enterprise." A buzz of interest rippled round the ship. "Many of you will know that the Enterprise is apparently heading for the heart of a supernova explosion. Some will even believe that they have seen it for themselves. Do not be concerned. I say again, do not be concerned. The explosion is an illusion, caused by a humonic brain connected to the ship's computer. Its purpose is to deceive the white hole, which has exhibited a degree of sentient awareness and will therefore be susceptible to the Talosian powers of illusion. The object is to lure it into extending a probe back into our continuum. Once the ship's sensors detect its presence, the data will be fed from our computer into the Kuba'al's. The two ships will then pass through the hole, using the Kuba'al's anti-matter weapons to cleave the initial passage and the Enterprise's superior gravity cushioning system to give protection against the colossal G-forces in



the hole's interior."

Pike paused, and his image directly caught Spock's eye. "I am sure your First Officer would say that luck does not come into it, but nevertheless I say to you all, 'Good luck, Enterprise'. This is Pike - out."

"Captain." Even as the vision of Pike was fading there was a flash from the sensors. "Sensors report unusual activity bearing two seven one mark zero."

"Attuclac, Mr. Spock?"

"That is my interpretation, Jim. Computer projects seventy five percent probability and rising. Eighty five. Ninety five. Captain, it is confirmed: we have contact."

"Did you get that heading, Mr. Sulu?"

"Programmed and locked in, sir. Waiting response from Kuba'al."

"Kuba'al acknowledges, sir," confirmed Uhura. "And another signal - 'Assume closer formation'."

"Minimum safe distance at this speed is five thousand kilometres, sir. And we're inside that already."

"Halve it, Mr. Sulu. Then halve it again. And activate gravity cushion."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The ship filled with a low, oppressive hum, as the gravity cushioning system was boosted to full power and directed outwards, forming a protective cloak about both vessels.

"Thirty seconds to contact."

Chekov tensed at Mr. Spock's warning, looking in vain for the characteristic spreading fan of blackness from the Kuba'al's amasers. "Why doesn't he fire? He'll leave it too late."

"Incorrect, Mr. Chekov. The amaser weapon is already firing. Anti-matter absorbs photons of real visible light, but the supernova, being an illusion, is unaffected. Contact in ten seconds. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

There was a 'whup', reminiscent of a sudden massive increase in air pressure. The ship and everybody aboard her were squeezed as if in a giant fist, tighter and tighter with each passing second.

"Captain, I can't breathe."

Uhura spoke for all of them, except Mr. Spock, who was gazing raptly at a computer read-out. "Fascinating!"

"Mr. - gasp - Spock?"

"This sensation of - slight - pressure we are experiencing is not borne out by the facts. The computer's monitors show ship's atmosphere stable at 14.7416 p.s.i."

"McCoy to Bridge. This pressure - "

"I was just on the point of explaining, Doctor. There is no increase in pressure. The phenomenon, although new to me, is plainly gravitational in origin."

"Well, that's just fascinating, Mr. Spock. And I've got twelve fascinated anoxia cases down here to prove it. Now would you like to know how to deal with it?"

"Of course."

"Then tell everyone to exhale forcefully, as hard as they can. To inhale, just let the pressure do the work." The heavy emphasis was wasted on Spock, who was already hard at work again at the computer. "One more thing. The blood samples you'll need are being taken now. I'll have them fed directly to the medical computer for analysis."

If he had hoped for Spock to be floored he would have been disappointed.

"Thank you, Doctor. I had despaired of instilling in you a sense of logic, but I see that all is not lost."

McCoy's recommended method of breathing brought a degree of relief, sufficient at least for an exasperated Kirk to be able to demand, "Will somebody please explain."

"Sure, Jim. This... phenomenon, as Spock calls it, may not be an increase in pressure, but it sure as hell has the same effect. We need the blood samples to analyse the volume of dissolved gases, so that when we break free the life support systems can increase pressure to compensate. If they don't get it right, we'll have the worst epidemic of the bends in medical history!"

"Kirk."

Lung suddenly appeared on the main screen. Kirk at once tried to warn him of the danger from the physiological effects of pressure, but he brushed the words aside. "Yes, we had already provided for that. But it is of no consequence. I would have chosen other companions, but it seems that we are to die together."

"What do you mean?"

"My Engineer tells me that we have less than sixty seconds of amaser power left. If at the end of that time we are still not clear - the white hole will crush us to neutrons."

"Sensors, Mr. Spock. Any sign of change?"

"Negative, Captain."

"Speculation. What are our chances?"

"Insufficient data for that, since our present situation has never previously been encountered. The end of the white hole will come - when it comes."

"Will you tell the ship's company, Captain?"

Kirk considered Uhura's question briefly. "No, Lieutenant. Every man aboard knows the dangers of this mission. If we are to come through, there is no point in spreading unnecessary alarm. If

not - "

"Farewell, Kirk." Lung gave an ironic laugh. "I should have wished to destroy you - personally."

"Five seconds, Jim," said Spock quietly.

And the Enterprise emerged into whiteness.

There was no glare, yet the whiteness was total, and all-pervading. Nor was it the close-enveloping whiteness of fog; this whiteness had depth, and breadth - and distance.

"Eet's - a kind of inky whiteness, Keptin."

"An excellent description, Mr. Chekov. We'll make a poet of you yet."

Of the Kuba'al there was no sign.

"We must have edged ahead of him." Sulu was thinking aloud. "And escaped from the hole just in time, while he got caught."

"Not so, Mr. Sulu. Sensors report the presence of Klingon vessel. Jim - he's on a collision course. Recommend take - "

A ghostly grey shape flashed across the screen, so close that it gave an illusion of individual Klingon faces peering out through view-ports.

"Evasive action, Mr. Sulu," snapped Kirk, finishing Spock's sentence for him. The Enterprise ducked to port, shuddering in the spent impulse waves of the Kuba'al's exhaust.

"Interesting," observed Spock, when the huge warship's image had cleared the screen.

"Mr. Spock?"

"Those dark specks on the screen. It takes a while for the eyes to accustom, but they are now quite clear."

"Shall I send for a maintenance technician, sir? To clean it?"

"No, Uhura." Kirk, too, had realised the significance of the black spots. "Those specks aren't dust on the screen -they're stars!"

It happened quite suddenly.

"Captain!" cried the white-faced ash-blonde beside Uhura at the communications station. "Look at the Kuba'al!"

The great shape of the Klingon had swum back into view as the Enterprise turned to follow her. As she did, a monstrous black shadow slid along her side, illuminating her in darkness.

The sun had risen.

Clear of the influence of Attuclac, which at this early stage of its sojourn in the white continuum was still relatively low, a black

disc had appeared, dominating the firmament and bathing everything in what could only be called black light. Not that much could be seen by it: aside from the two ships, the only object in the sky was a single planet, high above the sun's north pole.

Two negroes faced each other; one with hair nearly as dark as his face, the other tall and thin, whose snow-white hair was brushed straight forward, accentuating his pointed ears.

"More than 'interesting', Mr. Spock?"

"Indeed, Captain. To this... anti-light... the ships' hulls must be translucent but not transparent."

"Explain."

"Obviously, the dark must be penetrating the ship, or we would not be experiencing this photographic effect. However, with complete transparency, the Kuba'al could not have been enshadowed."

"Well, at all events we seem to have made our landfall."

"The Earth Mother?" Spock ran a quick check through the computer. "The plane of elevation is certainly consistent. Computer calculates this planet's mean distance from its sun to be 151 million kilometres - " He paused, to do his own calculations. "Yes, Jim, I would estimate the probability of this being the system depicted by the orrery at sixty nine point one percent."

"No sign of the Eye-tailed Reptile, though."

"I had - naturally - taken that into account. Had there been a second planet, my prognosis would have been much higher."

"Perhaps Attuclac got it already?"

"Unlikely, Mr. Sulu. The position - " He broke off as Lung's face appeared on screen, as weirdly negative as their own.

"Fleet will orbit the planet. I shall beam down to make contact with the aliens. Detail a landing party to accompany me. Armed, in case of treachery."

"The Klingon mind!" muttered Sulu to Chekov.

"You will remain in charge. Lung out."

"I'm not sure it's an improvement." McCoy grinned broadly at Spock, who was looking much more himself. "I was getting quite used to those fluorescent white eyebrows. You look almost Human."

Spock raised one of them. "I cannot be insulted, Doctor. Although logic tells me that I should be."

Kirk changed the subject. "What exactly did you do, Miss Kinshaw?"

"It was SKip's idea really, sir." The D.S.O., as SKip's author, looked suitable modest. "It suggested that light in one of the non-visible wavebands might act as a neutralising agent. We scanned the wavelengths and came up with this one, then just switched it into

the ship's normal lighting system."

"Captain." Spock pressed Kirk, as he had been doing ever since Lung announced his intention to beam down. "Have you reached a decision?"

"I take your point, Mr Spock. Lung isn't the ideal choice for a first contact with this universe. But I need you here. Mr. Scott will lead our party. Mr. Sulu second in command. Ensign Potato will lead the security detachment." He saw the D.S.O. almost jumping up and down. "Yes, all right, Miss Kinshaw, you can go too. See if you can rustle up some portable infrared gear. O.K. with you, Scotty?"

"Aye, aye, SIR!" Scott was clearly delighted at the chance of getting off the ship, rather than being left with the conn, but sobered slightly as Kirk added, "And Scotty - watch him!"

"On my command." Lung's voice patched into a hailing frequency between the two ships' main transporter rooms. "Are you ready, Scott?"

"Aye, aye, Commodore." Scott pronounced the word in much the same tone as he would have used for 'sassenach'.

"Then prepare to energise. Energise - now."

Kyle operated the levers and the landing party shimmered into transporter beams. Within seconds they were back.

If Potato had not forgotten to close the lid of his communicator they would all have been in deep trouble. No sooner had they materialised on the Earth Mother's surface than the whole party collapsed on the ground, ears covered in a futile attempt to deaden the excruciating wall of sound. Forty hard rock bands amplified in the middle of a hurricane would have paled into silence by comparison.

Fortunately, thanks to Potato's unfastened communicator, the same was heard on the Enterprise, a couple of hundred miles overhead. Kyle had just time to slam the levers into reverse before he too was overcome by the noise. The landing party arrived in a series of untidy heaps on the transporter pads.

Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel arrived on the double, in response to an urgent summons. Spock was not far behind.

"No permanent damage done," McCoy was saying. "All right, Miss Kinshaw, you can put 'em away again now." (It was a standing joke on the Enterprise that nobody had ever seen the D.S.O.'s ears. They were reputed to be sprouting points.)

"I didn't know they were out, Doctor." D.S.O. Kinshaw's expression was at her most deadpan.

McCoy looked baffled, then coloured explosively as the D.S.O. looked, pretend-anxiously - down at her chest. "Dammit, Spock, I swear it's catching!"

"Report, Mr. Scott." Kirk arrived hot-foot from the bridge, where he had delayed a few seconds to check the stability of their orbit.

Scott's ears were not as young as the D.S.O.'s, or as well protected. He shook his head insistently, in a final effort to silence the bells inside his head.

"I canna tell ye much, Cap'n. Ah couldnae keep ma eyes open - yon din was just too far over the threshold of pain. If Mr. Kyle hadna brought us back when he did, we'd have been done for."

"There wasn't much to see, sir." D.S.O. Kinshaw spoke up. "It was like a black fog - sort of treacly."

"With or without your infrared lamp?"

"Without it, sir. I did manage to switch it on, but then the noise got me. I'm afraid it got left down there. I must have dropped it."

"Think carefully, Miss Kinshaw."

The D.S.O. turned as Spock addressed her for the first time.

"Concentrate your visual memory. Try to clear your mind of all other senses. What you saw on the infrared may not have registered on your conscious mind, but the image will still be there."

The D.S.O. screwed up her forehead in a frown of concentration.

"There were - No, that sounds silly. You'll laugh."

"Humour is an emotion," Spock reminded her.

"There were... triangles."

"Hallucination, Bones?" queried Kirk.

"Could be, Jim. Extremes of noise can play havoc with the other senses."

"How about the Klingons? Were they equally affected?"

Everybody had forgotten the Klingons.

"Kirk to Bridge. Get me the Kuba'al's transporter chief. Priority red."

"Kuba'al's answering, sir."

"Kirk to flagship. Emergency. Recall your landing party immediately."

"What's the matter, Kirk?" Lung sounded smug. "Can't you people take a little noise?"

"Glad you're O.K., sir," Kirk said, politely but not entirely sincerely.

"Interesting," pondered Spock. "The structure of the Klingon ear - "

"Is much the same as yours, Mr. Spock. Fortunately it was not put to the test. A transporter malfunction forced me to postpone beaming down."

"Why, you - " Scott was almost purple with rage. "Cap'n, Klingon transporters are the most reliable there are. That evil shiny golloch must have waited on us, to make sure it was safe."

"Mr. Scott - " Kirk said warningly. But Lung who could not have failed to overhear, showed no sign of displeasure. 'Shiny' was, after all, true. He had no idea what a 'golloch' was. And in Klingon parlance, the word 'evil' was a compliment. He merely said, "I shall expect your solution to the problem of the noise in one hour. Lung out." And broke the hailing link.

The debriefing was still going on.

"You next, Mr. Potato. Tell us any little thing you can remember. The smallest detail may help us to identify the noise and combat it."

Potato looked unhappy. "I can't remember a t'ing, sorr. Just this diabolical racket. Then I passed out into the blessed sound of silence."

"That's it!" D.S.O. Kinshaw exclaimed. "Spud, you're a genius!"

Ensign Potato, to whom (along with the rest of the crew) this was news, said, "Am I, Miss?" but the D.S.O. was already chattering animatedly to the computer, only stopping to glance belatedly at her chief.

"May I?"

"An illogical question, since you already have."

"Computer. Execute sonic recall program."

"Working."

"Do you monitor all incoming transmissions?"

"Affirmative."

"Then you have a recording of the noise from Mr. Potato's communicator?"

"I believe I just said that."

"Oh, don't you start!" exclaimed McCoy involuntarily, but the D.S.O., realising that this was liable to hang the program, said crisply,

"Cancel that."

"Command deleted. Ready."

"Analyse noise level. State difference between maximum and minimum volume."

"Working." A pause. "Incremental value twelve point three seven decibels."

"Can you reduce volume until the minimum level is just inaudible."

"Affirmative."

Testily - "Do it." Then, as manners reasserted themselves - the Enterprise's computer was sufficiently advanced to appreciate them - "Please."

"Ready. Do you wish to hear the modified sound?"

"Yes, please."

There was a burst of soft, ethereal music, fluctuating in tone and volume, with clearly defined breaks.

"Again."

The sound was repeated.

"And again."

The D.S.O. was so absorbed that she didn't even hear Kirk's quiet "Do you think this is leading anywhere, Mr. Spock?"

"I believe so, Captain. If I follow her logic correctly, she is working on the premise that since light and dark are inverted in this continuum, the same may be true of sound and silence."

"Call universal translator program."

"Check. Working." A longer pause than usual. "Insufficient data for reliable translation. Accuracy prognosis only twenty-three point one percent. Calling ship-H module for situation feasibility match." Another pause, at the end of which even the computer sounded excited. "Prognosis increased to ninety point six percent."

Kirk gave a low whistle. "Give translation."

"The best-estimate translation of the sound-silence combination is - "

"Go ON!" yelled D.S.O. Kinshaw.

"Take me to your leader."

A heavy lead box materialised on the planetary surface. Inside it was a thick layer of soft fibre padding. Inside that was a hastily constructed cellular flask; most of the cells were vacuum-emptied, but there were enough air cells to admit a minimal amount of sound to the flask's interior. This interior was filled with a second layer of padding.

And inside that was a Klingon communicator.

"Spud, do you think you could pop down to the Comms. Stores and fetch us some cans? Good strong ones. Nine sets."

Potato would do anything for the D.S.O., but this time he looked at her blankly. "Yes, Miss. Fosters, Heineken or Rigelbrau? And wouldn't the liquor store be better?"

The D.S.O. explained what she wanted and, while Potato was fetching nine pairs of headphones from Uhura's stock, busied herself with modification to the computer's audio system.

"I'm going to need some noise," she said over her shoulder. "Something really loud. I don't want to use the recording of what came up from the planet - I'm trying to get the computer to neutralise one noise with another and I want to be sure it can cope with anything thrown at it."

Kirk had a mischievous idea. "Scotty, can you actually play those bagpipes in your cabin, or are they just there for decoration?"

The Chief Engineer drew himself up to his full height. "I'll have ye know, Cap'n, I won those pipes at the Highland Games on Caledonia IV."

"Yes, but can you play them?"

Scott left without a word, and for a couple of minutes there was silence, save for the D.S.O.'s one-way conversation with the computer. Then there came footsteps in the corridor and a noise like a cow suffering from terminal flatulence. This gave way to the strains of 'Amazing Grace' and a red-faced Mr. Scott marched in.

"Perfect," mouthed D.S.O. Kinshaw to her Captain. It was impossible to hear whether or not she had spoken aloud. Unfortunately, it was also impossible for the computer to hear her command to run the program on which she had been working. She tried three or four times, before giving up and motioning Scott to silence.

Kirk took the opportunity to ask, "Don't you know any cheerful tunes, Scotty?"

"Och, this is a cheerful tune, Cap'n. You should hear a lament."

Spock, whose ears were particularly sensitive to the combination of frequencies produced by the pipes, winced inwardly, but managed to conceal the fact under a mask of Vulcan stoicism. "It is to be hoped that the need for one does not arise."

"For once, Mr. Spock, we are in complete agreement."

"Thank you, Doctor." Spock winced a second time as the pipes started up again, in response to the D.S.O.'s signal. But then, miraculously, the sound faltered, flattened, diminuendoed to a low groan and finally faded out altogether, leaving Scott huffing and puffing into an apparently silent instrument.

"It works!" Kirk sounded faintly surprised.

"Naturally, Captain." The upward movement of Spock's right eyebrow was just barely detectable. "As I believe I have reminded you before, I trained her myself."

But would it work on the planet?

In the event, it worked perfectly. The voice patterns of the landing party were fed into the program, so that they would be exempted from the noise screening process, and the universal

translator was linked into the system so that the silent speech of whatever was inhabiting the surface could be intercepted by the computer and converted into standard English.

"Landing party, report your status."

The cold voice of Lung was filling the headphones almost before the last transporter shimmer had faded eerily into the swirling black mists.

"Down in one piece, Commodore," confirmed Scott. "Just started rigging up the infrared arcs."

D.S.O. Kinshaw, flushed with recent success, couldn't resist adding, "Come on in, Commodore. The water's lovely."

"Some day I will know," Lung said, as if to himself but making sure that the threat was quite audible. "For your information, Miss Kinshaw, Klingons do not indulge in aquatic pastimes. And my Science Officer reminds me that your position is over three hundred miles from the nearest ocean."

"Yon Krass wouldnae know an ocean if he was drowning in it," grunted Scott, slightly unfairly. Keras, the Kuba'al's Science Officer, had been seconded to the expedition at the express request of the joint High Command. "Right, lassie, that's the last of the lamps. Let's get 'em switched on."

Slowly, as if light itself travelled here at a fraction of its normal pace, the infrared beam cut through the murk, revealing the world of the Earth Mother in all its stark strangeness.

At first - and for quite a while - nobody spoke, until with a gulp Potato broke the silence, quoting, "For now we see through a glass, darkly."

"Through a glass lightly in this universe, Ensign." Sulu tried to laugh, but he too was awed by the sight.

If nature abhorred a straight line, then she had not been at work here. Everything about this planet was angular, from the multi-faceted pebbles at their feet to the distant hills, glimpsed tantalisingly through breaks in the fog, whose skylines might have been drawn by a giant hand with an invisible ruler.

Dominating everything, in the middle distance away to their right, was a two hundred foot high solid cube, stationary, but seeming to dance in and out of the moving mist.

Then came the triangles.

At first there was just one, ten feet tall, appearing as a dark blue transparency in the black wall of the cube before moving out into the open towards the landing party. It was soon joined by many others, isosceles-shaped, gliding along on their bases and glowing with an inner darkness. A faint murmur came through the headphones; silence emanating from the triangles being converted into sound by the computer high above, but too faint to be of use to the translator.

Only when they were quite close did the triangles assume a three-dimensional form, becoming tall, slender pyramids. One of them approached Securityman Chang and leaned towards him, still keeping

its form while giving the appearance of extending a hand of friendship.

Before he realised what was happening, the Securityman was inside the pyramid. There was just time to see an expression of horror flit across his face.

Then his face exploded.

A second triangle, in the process of making similar overtures to Securityman Chandrasekar, seemed to realise its mistake. It recoiled, but not before another of Potato's squad was lying in a crumpled heap on the carpet of pebbles.

Potato, seeing his command diminishing even more rapidly than usual, looked sharply around for the other three. Two of them were safe enough for the moment, Securityman Gough having stationed himself to guard the D.S.O. as she knelt taking tricorder readings, while Securityperson N'donga was patrolling the perimeter of the group. Securityman Pugh, seeing what had happened to his colleagues, was backing away from a group of triangles, not realising that a second group was behind him, trying to get out of his way.

Potato, too far away to prevent another tragedy, shouted a desperate warning.

"Pugh, be careful!"

He was too late.

"Why, the murdering - " began Scott. He stopped, remembering who was in command, took quick stock of the situation, and ordered, "Close on me, quickly. Scott to Enterprise - get us out of here."

"WAIT!"

The cry which came through the translator was so desperate that Scott couldn't help countering the order. "Hold it, Enterprise. But be ready to beam us up on my signal."

As one, and in a single graceful movement, the triangles inverted themselves base over apex, formed a ring, and leaned inwards, looking like a group of elderly men discussing a secret but knotty problem. Problem solved, they drew apart again; some reinverted themselves, then all merged together to form a single large pyramid. The dark blue glow clouded, cleared, and settled into a thick translucence.

"Profound apologies for the deaths of your companions. The Thinking Ones could not comprehend that you were breathers."

The pyramid advanced upon Scott and Sulu, who, not surprisingly, advanced backwards at an equal speed.

"Come. There is nothing to fear now. The vacuum of which we were composed has been filled with a pressurised oxygen-helium mixture. You will be able to breathe normally. But you must enter the pyramid if we are to conduct you to the Thinking Ones." And, as Scott and Sulu continued to show reluctance, "PLEASE - I beg of you."

"Oh, well." The D.S.O. gave a laugh which was not entirely convincing. "Got to start trusting someone, I suppose."

She took a step towards the pyramid, but found herself elbowed aside by Potato. "Better let me, Miss."

He strode purposefully through the base of the pyramid. The blue translucence closed over his knees, his shoulders, his head.

He quacked, twice.

The ship's computer successfully detected his voice pattern, but was momentarily floored as the oxy-helium mixture played havoc with his vocal cords. In any case, what he had said - "It's air" - was inaccurate; air it clearly wasn't, though equally clearly it was breathable.

"Come," the pyramid said again, and soon all six, Scott, Sulu, Potato, D.S.O. Kinshaw and the surviving security ratings were inside it, walking solemnly in a cruciform formation with Potato, the tallest, directly beneath the apex.

As they approached the wall of the great stone cube a change took place, as the entire assembly reverted to a two-dimensional form; six star trekkers flattened themselves against the face of the cube, stood for a moment, then disappeared inside it as if they had never been.

"It's light," gasped Potato.

"Of course," said the pyramid. "That is because you are now un-matter."

"Like the un-light and the un-sound?" hazarded Sulu.

"Exactly like - " the pyramid started to reply, but its voice was extinguished by a silence so total that it came through the inversion process as a thunderous booming.

"Step forward, my children." And when, hesitantly, they did, "So you have come."

Mr. Spock would doubtless have said, "Evidently, since we are here," but he was not here and his assistant was much too awed by what she was seeing to say it for him.

Ahead of them, in the heart of the cube, loomed five tall shadows, formless but still vaguely humanoid. Where the heads would have been glowed three eyes, green, amber and red, like traffic lights which had become inverted and, malfunctioning, were all glowing at once.

"Tricorder," whispered Scott, but the D.S.O. whispered back,

"It isn't functioning," so he asked the question himself.

"Are you alive?"

"We are of the solid essence; the last intelligences of our world." The voice muted itself, as if in a terrible sadness. "Once we were alive. As you are alive."

"What happened?"

"We reached for the stars, but found only self-doubt. In doing so, we attained the capability of destroying ourselves."



Light dawned. "You fought a war?"

"No, Mr. Sulu. If only we had. Some of us might have survived. When we landed on the fourth planet - that which we depicted as an angry star - we found that aeons earlier its people had perished in just such a war. The faint hearts among us declared that this was the inevitable price of progress. Why reach for the stars, they argued, when our own poor world was in such plight? When disease was rife and millions went hungry?"

"So we abandoned the exploration of our universe, which is the greatest mistake an intelligent race can make, for to do so was tantamount to eating the seed corn of our future. There can be no standing still. When there is no progress, there is regression. Where there is no purpose, there is apathy. Where there is no questing, there is - nothing."

"We became inward-looking - introspective. We fed the hungry millions but allowed hungry billions to breed in their place. Intelligence polarised; its lower orders became ever lower, and multiplied, while the higher intelligences became higher - and fewer."

"At last the resources of the Earth Mother had been consumed and squandered beyond recall. When even the air we breathed became too poor to support life, we no longer had the technology to - " here the translator had to seek long and hard for an appropriate word - "terraform our own world."

"The few true intellects who survived had already been driven underground - literally underground - by the degenerate mob. They had created their own life support environment. Now, with life fast becoming impossible on the surface, they settled into a life of total contemplation. Ironically in a race which had bred itself into extinction, there were too few to establish a viable breeding colony. Since we could not reproduce ourselves, and in order to preserve the sum total of our planet's experience, we were forced to mutate into immortality. The form we chose, after much trial, is that which you see."

"We have a limited mobility, and a degree of telekinetic power - the geometroids which brought you inside here are a telekinetic manifestation."

"The triangles and pyramids?" puzzled Potato.

"I believe I said that," the shadowy figure said sternly, ignoring the D.S.O.'s splutter of laughter. "But we no longer have the capability we now need, that of destroying this planet."

"Destroying the planet? But why, man?"

The impersonal voice had a hint of a wan smile in it. "Thank you, Mr. Scott. It is many centuries since one of our race was called that." It became serious again. "We have calculated that if the planet is disintegrated within six days, the white hole will be forced to ingest the debris as it crosses our orbit. This will slow its progress enough to stop it reaching our sun."

"But surely on its next pass - ?"

"Its next pass will be too late. The cosmic progress of this system is tangential to the hole's sphere of influence. By the time it returns, the sun will be out of its reach. There remains the

all-important question; we cannot destroy this world - but can you?"

Scott gave the matter thought. "Aye, we could," he said finally. "But where would we take you? Could you survive in our universe?"

"Your kindness touches us." The second voice sounded older; clearly the first had been a spokesman only. "But there can be no question of our leaving here. We could not survive outside this Stone, let alone off-world."

"Wipe out a whole race?" Scott's anguished tone was one which James Kirk would have known well. "That's no' a decision I can take. Not by myself."

"Then you must consult your Captain. You may beam back to your ship without leaving the Stone. When you materialise, you will assume your normal state.

"But go now, without delay. Time is short."

"We'll be back in an hour," Scott promised. "Scott to Enterprise."

"Kirk here."

"Did ye get that, Cap'n?"

"Every word, Mr. Scott. Report back aboard for consultation. Mr. Kyle, six to beam up."

SNAPPP.

Six people dematerialised in the heart of the mighty stone cube.

Three of them materialised on the Enterprise.

Until now, nobody on the Kuba'al had heard Commodore Lung laugh.

"No, Mr. Scott," he said to himself. "To obliterate an entire world - that is a decision you cannot take." He laughed again, the sound cascading from him with all the warmth of liquid oxygen trickling from a flask.

"But I can!"

#### THE EYE OF THE COMET

##### Captain's Log Stardate 6019.5

The combined Klingon/Federation expedition has successfully penetrated the white hole Attuctac. We find ourselves in a weird topsy-turvy universe, where black is white and sound is silence. We have located the Earth Mother planet, whose black sun is about to be destroyed by Attuctac.

On the orders of Commodore Lung, a landing party led by Lieutenant Commander Scott has beamed down and made contact with the planet's last inhabitants, five immortal mutant minds resident as 'unmatter'

inside a 200 foot stone cube. Scott has been told that the only way to save both this universe and ours is to feed the white hole by detonating the planet. The landing party is beaming up for a conference.

Transporter Log - Kyle - 6074.5.275

Six persons beamed from planet. Only three arrived on board ship.

"Report, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu, still registering amazement at finding himself and the two security ratings alone on the transporter pad, turned back to face his Captain.

"They were here a moment ago, sir," he said. "That is to say, they were there - I mean..."

"I know what you mean, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Kyle, is there a malfunction?"

"All instruments reading normal, sir. And we were locked on to them. I'm sure of that."

"Kirk." Lung came on the ship-to-ship link. "What is going on over there?"

"Three of our people have failed to return from the planet, Commodore. We seem to have a transporter malfunction."

"Impossible!" snapped Lung. "We have monitored all transporter activity since orbit was stabilised. If your people have not returned from the planet they are still down there. Isn't that so, Keras?"

"Had there been any malfunction, Commodore, I should undoubtedly be aware of it."

"Then we must locate them at once."

"Kirk, must I remind you of the stone-dweller's words? Time is pressing. You and your Science Officer will beam down to finalise matters. Lung out."

"Aye, aye, sir. Mr. Spock, you will come with me. Mr. Sulu, if we fail to return, you will assume command of the Enterprise as Acting Captain. Computer, note my order."

"So logged."

"But Captain - "

"The Commodore is quite right, Mr. Sulu. Cosmic considerations must outweigh the safety of individuals, no matter who they are."

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Sulu." The quietly-spoken Keras was still on the link. "Our sensors are scanning the planet now. If your people are safe, you have my assurance that they will come to no further harm."

Kirk did not reply. Spock said, "I believe he can be trusted, Mr. Sulu." And with that, the helmsman had to be content.

"Believe me, Captain Kirk, there is no other way. Even if we were alive, our survival would be as nothing compared with the survival of time itself."

Spock turned to his Captain. "Jim, they are right. The loss of all those millennia of accumulated knowledge is a most grievous waste, but the logic is unanswerable. Whatever the cost, the white hole must be prevented from stabilizing in its present location. The planet must be destroyed."

The eldest of the stone-dwellers spoke, for only the second time. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. Your mastery of logic does you great credit." Spock acknowledged the compliment gravely as the stone-dweller went on. "Just as your compassion does you, Captain. But take comfort in the knowledge that we are weary of this living death, to which our race's foolishness consigned us. Its end will be most welcome to us."

Kirk came to his decision.

"Very well. We will return to our ship and begin the necessary computations. Is there anything we can do to help you prepare for - the end?"

"Just answer the last unanswered question of all. Mr. Spock, am I right in thinking that it was your race who correctly interpreted the meaning of the white orrery?"

Spock was standing absolutely still, an expression of deep concern on his face. Kirk prompted him. "Mr. Spock?" And, as Spock still did not react, "Spock, is something the matter?"

"Didn't you feel it, Jim? A most curious vibration. Like a... liquid quake." Then, as he realised that the stone-dweller had been addressing him, "I beg your pardon, sir. Yes, it was my people - indeed, it was my father - who first divined your existence. Once that deduction had been made, the orrery spoke for itself, most - eloquently."

"How sad." The yearning in the hollow voice was heart-rending. "To know that such perfect logic is indeed attainable in a true lifeform. If only we - " It broke off, in something very close to a sob.

"Less than perfect, sir," said Spock quietly. "It took you to tell us of your existence. But how did you know of ours?"

"Not by logic, Mr. Spock." The wry humour was back in the voice of the original Spokesman. "Or should I say, not by logic alone. On one of its incursions into your universe, the white hole ingested a space vessel so massive that it was - regurgitated. Scraps of it flew like crumbs from the lips of an ill-bred child, speaking with its mouth full. We sent a geometrid to recover a piece. When analysed, its material was found to be - not of our universe."

Spock raised an eyebrow, in silent comment upon the echo of his father's words on Starbase XIII, but before he could comment aloud there came another tremor. This time Kirk felt it too; a feeling of

swirling waters rushing up into the stone cube from somewhere far below. At the same time the silence in the headphones became infiltrated with a sound, quite soft but insidiously throbbing.

"Kirk to Enterprise." And, more urgently, "Enterprise. Respond, please."

But the Enterprise did not respond. There was nothing in the headphones except the insistent rhythmic throbbing, steadily getting louder.

Lung ground his balled fist into his right hand. "It is not working."

"It will work."

"The frequency. Are you sure it's correct?"

"My calculations are invariably correct, Commodore. It will work..."

Lung was not used to being dominated by anybody, least of all a subordinate. It was a new experience for him.

"It had better," he said, almost sulkily. But the Science Officer gave no indication of having heard.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk. Captain Kirk or Mr. Spock. Come in, please."

Uhura looked up from her console. "I'm getting no response, Mr. Sulu."

The loneliness of command is a mental state. Actual physical loneliness is a luxury seldom afforded to those to whom command is unexpected, unwelcome and under circumstances of extreme pressure. The demands on the attention are too numerous.

"Mr. Sulu. Look at the planet."

The disk on the viewscreen was no longer still. It was vibrating; reverberating like a beaten gong.

Sulu, bereft of any science officers, was forced to man the sensors himself. When he straightened up, he was rapping out orders faster than Kirk at his most brisk.

"Bridge to Engineering. Prepare to leave orbit. I shall need maximum impulse power. Beam the Captain and Mr. Spock up now. I don't care what they're doing. Uhura, get me the Kuba'al." And, in response to the questioning stares from all around him, "There's some form of interference with the planet's natural sound pattern. It's causing pressure waves to build up in the magma, and they're reaching the critical point. The planet's about to disintegrate."

"Kuba'al's not answering, sir."

An even more disturbing report came from Chekov. "Kep - Mr. Sulu. The Kuba'al - she's gone."

But the most disturbing report of all came from the transporter room.

"It's no good, Mr. Sulu. The transporter doesn't function. Something's jamming it."

"Keep trying. Computer, give me a countdown to the planet's break-up. Relay it to Engineering."

"Working. Twenty seven seconds. Twenty five."

"Engineering - when the count reaches five, full speed ahead."

"You can't just leave them!"

"The Captain's first concern is for the safety of the ship, Uhura. He entrusted that to me. I cannot break that trust."

"Ten seconds. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five."

"Full power."

"Four. Three. Two. One."

The Enterprise soared out of orbit as, behind her, the planet shattered like an empty wineglass.

"Acoustic feedback on a global scale." Lung watched the display with a cruel little smile of satisfaction. "Congratulations, Keras. I told you it would work."

"Indeed, Commodore?" The Science Officer scarcely bothered to conceal the ironic question mark. Lung was much too preoccupied to notice it.

"The Enterprise is clear, Commodore," reported the Kuba'al's helmsman."

"A pity. But no matter. We can deal with her at our leisure." Lung saluted, mockingly, at the spreading blot which had once been the Earth Mother. "Farewell, Kirk. Gentlemen, our missions - both of our missions - are accomplished."

"Are you questioning my orders, Sulu?"

"Captain Sulu, sir."

"WHAT?"

Sulu faced Lung squarely over the desk in Kirk's cabin. "Captain Kirk's last act was to appoint me Acting Captain of the Enterprise. I shall remain so until his successor comes aboard to take command. Until that time, I should be grateful for the courtesy due to me. Sir."

"Kirk never - "

"Captain Kirk was a bigger man than I, sir. In every sense. He had no need to preserve face in front of his subordinates. And no,

sir, I was not questioning your orders. Just reminding you - respectfully - that our task is to ensure that the white hole does not molest the dark star. And the Enterprise will not leave for home until I am satisfied that the destruction of the Earth Mother has had the predicted effect. Sir."

Lung was saved from having to reply by a knock on the cabin door. Yeoman Rand entered in response to Sulu's call of, "Come in, please."

"Mr. Chekov's compliments, sir, and could you come."

The reason for Chekov's call was clear on the screen as soon as Lung and Sulu entered the bridge. Following its usual practice, the white hole was putting out an exploratory tongue to lap up its prey, but this time there was a difference; the debris of the Earth Mother was actually recoiling from it. A quick check of the sensors revealed the reason; the globules of liquid magma from the planet's core had collectively formed themselves into an unmagnet, and were being repelled by the normal magnetic forces from within the hole itself.

"It seems that you were right, Captain Sulu." Even when making such an admission, Lung could not keep the sneer out of his voice. "Our mission is not yet completed. I shall return to my ship to consult my Science Officer. Since you have been so careless as to lose yours."

Sulu slumped down in the command chair. The loneliness of command was suddenly very real.

"What the blazes do we do now?"

"FILTH!"

The catering arrangements in the Kuba'al's brig were no better than those aboard the Krayda'ak, but it was not until Scott flung the bowl of watery porridge at the wall that it became clear that he was referring to the food rather than to his Klingon captors. D.S.O. Kinshaw had already given up on a plateful of fish fingers; it was not their lack of taste that revolted her (although any form of flavour was quite spectacularly absent) so much as the fact that the synthesizer had given them fingernails - and not particularly clean ones at that.

She glanced across to the synthesizer cabinet, where Potato was looking dubiously at a round, wizened object which bore a striking resemblance to the Great Head of Talos.

"I think it's meant to be a baked potato," she said hastily, before its namesake could advance any more colourful theories of his own. Potato opened the cabinet and carelessly removed the object, swore roundly and juggled it a few times before dropping it like the hot potato it purported to be. It landed on the floor with a thud and a bounce, and rolled through the open door of the brig. Potato watched it, stupefied.

"Good," said the D.S.O.. "We can still get out."

During their brief captivity on the Krayda'ak, she and Scott had discovered something unknown to Lung; the force field guarding the

doorway of Klingon brigs was effective only against Klingons, as it reacted with the minute traces of free metal present in the shiny Klingon skin. Before you could say K/S she was up and away. "Come on, let's find a transporter."

"Hold your horses, Lassie." Scott came puffing after her. "This is no' the way we came."

"No, sir. But it's the way we're going. I studied the plans of these ships when we met one off Hendau. The Captain had a private transporter of his own. We'll use that."

It was a sound plan. The main transporter room, in which Scott and his party had found themselves when the Kuba'al's transporter had hi-jacked them, was always heavily guarded. Lung's private one would have two sentries at most.

It was just unfortunate that Lung chose that moment to return to it, from the Enterprise.

"May I make a suggestion, Mr. Sulu?"

Sulu smiled wryly. "I wish you would, Dr. McCoy."

"There's a program in the computer called SKip. It's supposed to emulate the reasoning of both Mr. Spock and Miss Kinshaw." McCoy paused, remembering the terrifying passage between Starbase XIII and the white hole. "It's really quite effective."

"Please define the problem. The voice in which the computer responded to the 'run SKip' instruction was its own, but the inflection was pure Spock. Uhura gave a half sob at the poignant reminder, but Sulu's voice was steady as he replied,

"The white hole is unable to ingest the planetary debris and is proceeding in pursuit of the Dark Star."

"That information is already available to me."

"Question; is it possible that the star will be similarly immune?"

"Since the planetary debris is clearly immune to the hole's advance, the hypothesis is - possible."

"But not probable?"

"Prognosis four point seven two five percent."

"Why so low?"

"The available data suggest that there exists a critical mass level at which normal gravitational forces are exactly counterbalanced by the anti-magnetic phenomena now being observed. There is no reason to doubt the evidence of the orrery, which depicted planets being consumed by the white hole. Since planets are not immune, it is most unlikely that the sun will be any more so."

"Then there is nothing more we can do?"

"There is always a course of action, Doctor."

The response was so Spock-like that McCoy forgot himself so far as to explode, "Dammit, Spock, WHAT?"

"I am not Spock. I was about to remind you that memory banks record one satellite of the Dark Star for which account has still to be made."

"The Eye-tailed Reptile," breathed Chekov from the navigation console.

"So there was. I'd forgotten that. I wonder what became of it?"

McCoy had not been looking at the main screen. Chekov, on the other hand, was. He was on his feet, pointing and jabbering excitedly. "Mr. Sulu, Dr. McCoy. Look!"

Climbing up the screen was a giant lizard, silvery-black against the white of the cosmic background. Its head was large and furry, and its body was curved. Both head and tail were pointed towards the Enterprise.

At the base of the tail was one gleaming red-gold eye.

It took a short while for the obvious to register.

"It's a comet!" exclaimed McCoy at last.

Sulu was thinking ahead, and aloud. "If we could divert it into the white hole's path - "

"That would be the logical course," the computer said. It continued in an altogether more feminine tone, and without pausing for electronic breath, "Doesn't anyone want to hear the lateral one?"

"By all means," said McCoy, with heavy irony.

"The best form of defence is attack. Rather than use the comet to defend the Dark Star, it would be preferable to use it as a weapon against the hole itself."

Scott would have said, "Preposterous, Lassie," but neither he nor the D.S.O. were present in person.

McCoy merely snorted, "Punch it on the nose and tell it to behave, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, Doctor." Skip reverted to its Spock persona. "Sensors report that the 'eye' of the comet is composed of 98.125 percent pure dilithium. With the correct stimulus it could generate enough anti-matter particles to incapacitate the hole - possibly even destroy it altogether."

"You didn't tell us that."

"You did not ask me, Doctor."

Sulu jumped in quickly to bring Skip back to the point. "What should we do?"

"It will be necessary to beam a party down to set up matter-antimatter reactors. The resulting power surge, properly channelled through a massive concentration of dilithium - "

"Should turn the comet into one big warp drive. With enough residual anti-matter to carve clean through the hole and out the other side. By golly, it might work at that!"

"It will work at that, Doctor. Now, as to personnel, I suggest that Lieutenants Hepple and Hepple are best qualified to carry out the engineering, with perhaps Gough and O'dong as defensive backup."

Preparations for the landing went ahead with all speed. Sulu fought a battle with his conscience about whether he might lead the expedition in person, but reluctantly decided that the Enterprise was too short of command grade officers to risk losing another. Events proved it to have been a wise decision.

No sooner had the landing party beamed down than there was an urgent report from the helmsman.

"Sir. We're picking up some kind of projectile. Extreme range, but closing fast."

"I see it." Sulu looked again, more closely, and gave a low whistle. "I do see it. What's more, Mr. Riley - I've seen it before."

It was three against three, but Scott and Co. were unarmed, whereas the Klingons were armed to the teeth. There was nothing for it but to march meekly back to the brig.

One of the guards waved his portable amaser threateningly, motioning them inside.

"Well, switch off the current first, mon."

"Give me one good reason why I should, Mr. Scott."

Scott couldn't think of one. The D.S.O. fixed Lung with a look of deadpan innocence and said with a calm she was far from feeling, "If you kill us, you'll never find out how we escaped, will you, sir?"

"Oh, I shall find out, Miss Kinshaw, rest assured of that." Lung took a step towards the master switch which controlled the brig's deadly force field. In doing so he trod on something large and crisp which, under the weight of his foot, collapsed into something large and slippery. The terror of the Klingon fleet sat down, heavily and painfully.

There was a shout of laughter from the two bodyguards; risky, because Lung, finding himself a laughing stock, was more than capable of testing the forcefield on those doing the laughing. But although his dignity was bruised, Lung's mind was not. He was staring, first at the remains of the potato, then through the brig doorway to the synthesizer which had produced it, then back at the potato.

He smiled chillingly.

"Lung to Engineering. I want three silver bullets and some water delivered to number one Brig. Now."

"Silver bullets, sir?"

"You heard me."

When Lung spoke, you moved. Before the erstwhile Irish Vampire had time to wonder how his fame had preceded him, a technician had arrived with three silver pellets and a flagon of water.

Still smiling, Lung handed one to each of his three captives. "Swallow these."

The D.S.O. looked at hers and gulped. "You might have made it gold, sir. I always think silver is such a cold metal."

"Not if you try to escape with these inside you." Lung laughed evilly, then turned to the guards. "Put them in the brig. And if they escape again - your lives are forfeit."

"Control to Commodore."

Lung, annoyed at having his gloat cut short, stabbed viciously at an intercom switch. "YES?"

"Commodore, we have located the missing object. It is a comet. And Commodore - it sees to be composed of almost pure dilithium."

By the time Lung hurried into the control room it was clear that the Enterprise had also sighted the comet, and was heading towards it.

"You know what this means?"

"Sir?" said the Science Officer, Keras, non-committally.

"With an unlimited supply of dilithium the Enterprise could generate enough anti-matter to escape back through the hole independently. And leave us behind." (It was typical of the Klingon mind to judge other peoples' standards by their own.) "They must be stopped. At any cost!"

"It will mean open warfare, Commodore," warned Keras. "So far they may suspect us of hostile acts, but they have no proof."

Lung ignored him. He repeated savagely,

"At any cost."

Lieutenants Wilson and Betty Keppler were one of the ship's few married couples. With the two security guards, they made an oddly assorted quartet. Betty was a petite ash-blond; Wilson was equally thin, but almost two feet taller. By contrast, Gough was short, stocky and barrel-chested, while N'donga was a muscular young woman of junoesque proportions.

For a while things went smoothly, despite the very low gravity on the Reptile's surface. The two engineers planted probes in the dilithium 'eye', at points selected by the computer to ensure maximum stimulation of the crystal. The guards patrolled the work area in a series of slow motion bounds, the bulky N'donga revelling in her new-found weight loss.

"It sure beats dieting!" Gough, no lightweight himself, agreed in response to her shout of,

"Hey, look at me!"

Their frolicking was cut short by an impatient call from the Acting Captain. "Sulu to landing party. Report your progress."

"Another fifteen minutes and we'll be through, sir."

"Make it ten, Lieutenant. The Kuba'al has just come within transporter range. I want to know at once if there's any Klingon activity."

"Aye, aye, sir. Keppler out. No - wait - " with sudden urgency - "Mr. Sulu, they're here. About a dozen of them, coming this way. Armed, too. Look as if they mean business."

"Can you finish before they reach you?"

"Not a chance, sir. They'll be on us before you can beam down reinforcements."

The automatic warning sounded on the bridge, leaving no time even to think about organising a relief column. Uhura sent all decks to red alert. Sulu had just time to yell brief instructions and "skip - cope!" before turning his full attention to something even more urgent. The distant contact glimpsed twenty minutes earlier had crept up on them and was now filling the main screen.

The 200-foot stone cuboid revolved slowly on an axis which was not quite diagonal, making it roll drunkenly on one foot.

"What ees it?" breathed Chekov. "Square John Silver?"

"Unless I'm much mistaken, that is the Stone Dwellers' cube. Yes - look there!"

One of the triangular geometroids appeared incuse on the leading face, waved its apex like a mouse sniffing the air, and retreated again. In his excitement Sulu shed both his oriental inscrutability and his carefully assumed commander's dignity.

"Take the conn, Pavel. Uhura, alert the transporter room. Two to beam across. And I'm coming down."

Uhura's face split into a broad grin. "You don't think - "

But the doors of the turbolift were already closing.

"Betty, beam up!"

"Not without you."

The approaching Klingons were almost within firing range.

"But there are only two probes left."

"Then we'll take one each." There was finality in his wife's tone and Wilson Keppler knew better than to argue about it.

Gough and N'donga took up defensive positions behind one of the small outcrops of dilithium, excrescences on the otherwise perfect single crystal which formed the eye of the pupil. "We'll cover you as long as we can."

The phaser is not such a devastating weapon as the Klingons' amaser, but its range is longer. A concentrated burst of phaser fire sent the Klingons diving for cover. If the numbers had not been so uneven, the impasse could have held indefinitely, but the odds were too great. Half the Klingons were enough to pin down Gough and N'donga, while their colleagues set up a pincer movement. Soon four of them were advancing on the engineers' unprotected backs as they worked feverishly on the last two probes. Their amasers came up to the firing position.

And wavered uncertainly.

Even the sinister black-gold of the Klingons' helmet visors seemed to register sheer disbelief. A samurai warrior in full armour had sprung up in front of them. His wickedly curved sword was raised, barring the way forward. Despite being unencumbered by any space helmet, he seemed perfectly comfortable in the near-vacuum.

His face was Sulu's.

A second Sulu appeared. And a third, a fourth. They held their position in silence for a few moments; then, with a wild cry, they charged.

Twelve Klingons scattered, but too slowly and too late. They stumbled blindly, hampered both by the low gravity and their bulky space suits. The charging Suluses ran at Earth gravity and at full Earth speed. One Klingon, slower than the rest, watched his own severed head bowling along before of him, before collapsing in a dead faint. Another, his legs amputated at the knees, continued running of bleeding stumps. Two more, fleeing from Suluses three and four, disembowelled themselves on the outstretched swords of Suluses five and six.

Gough and N'donga, still ensconced behind their protective cover, watched the whole extraordinary performance in amazement, as if unable to comprehend their good fortune. When it finally dawned on them that the Klingons had lost all interest in fighting, they took full advantage of the situation. Reducing their phaser settings to heavy stun, they began picking off their fleeing adversaries one by one. Soon one Klingon was dead - in falling, his face mask was shattered against the sharp corner of a dilithium boulder - four more were firmly convinced that they were dead, and six were too stunned to care one way or the other.

Which left the one who caused the tragedy.

More single-minded than the rest, he had not lost sight of his mission and was determined to carry it through. Rising up from a shallow depression in which he had sought cover, he took careful aim at Wilson Keppler and squeezed the trigger, just as N'donga saw what he was about. With a single fluid movement she swivelled, flipped the setting back to 'kill' and fired. Spun off balance, the dying Klingon sent a searing burst of simulated antimatter deep into the pupil of the dilithium eye.

An anti-magnetic field of savage intensity spewed from the heart of the comet, enveloping all those on its surface. It did them no

physiological harm - but their minds were erased, totally and beyond recall.

"Captain Kirk! Mr. Spock! Is it really you?"

Captain and First Officer stepped down from the transporter pads to which they had been beamed from the heart of the stone cube. Spock's eyebrows were at their most active.

"It would appear that logic has not flourished during our absence, Captain."

"It would indeed, Mr. Spock" Kirk was grinning broadly as Sulu advanced, saluted and held out his hand.

"Good to have you back, sir. Both of you. I'll tell you, I never thought I'd be so pleased by a sudden demotion."

"Bridge to Captain Sulu," Uhura cut in, sounding agitated.

"Captain Kirk here, Lieutenant."

"Sir!" Joyfully. "Then - "Mr. Sulu, we've lost all contact with the landing party."

Kirk looked enquiringly at Sulu, who nodded to Kyle.

"Beam them up. Now."

"Jim! Spock!"

Dr. McCoy had rushed to the transporter room in response to the emergency medical call.

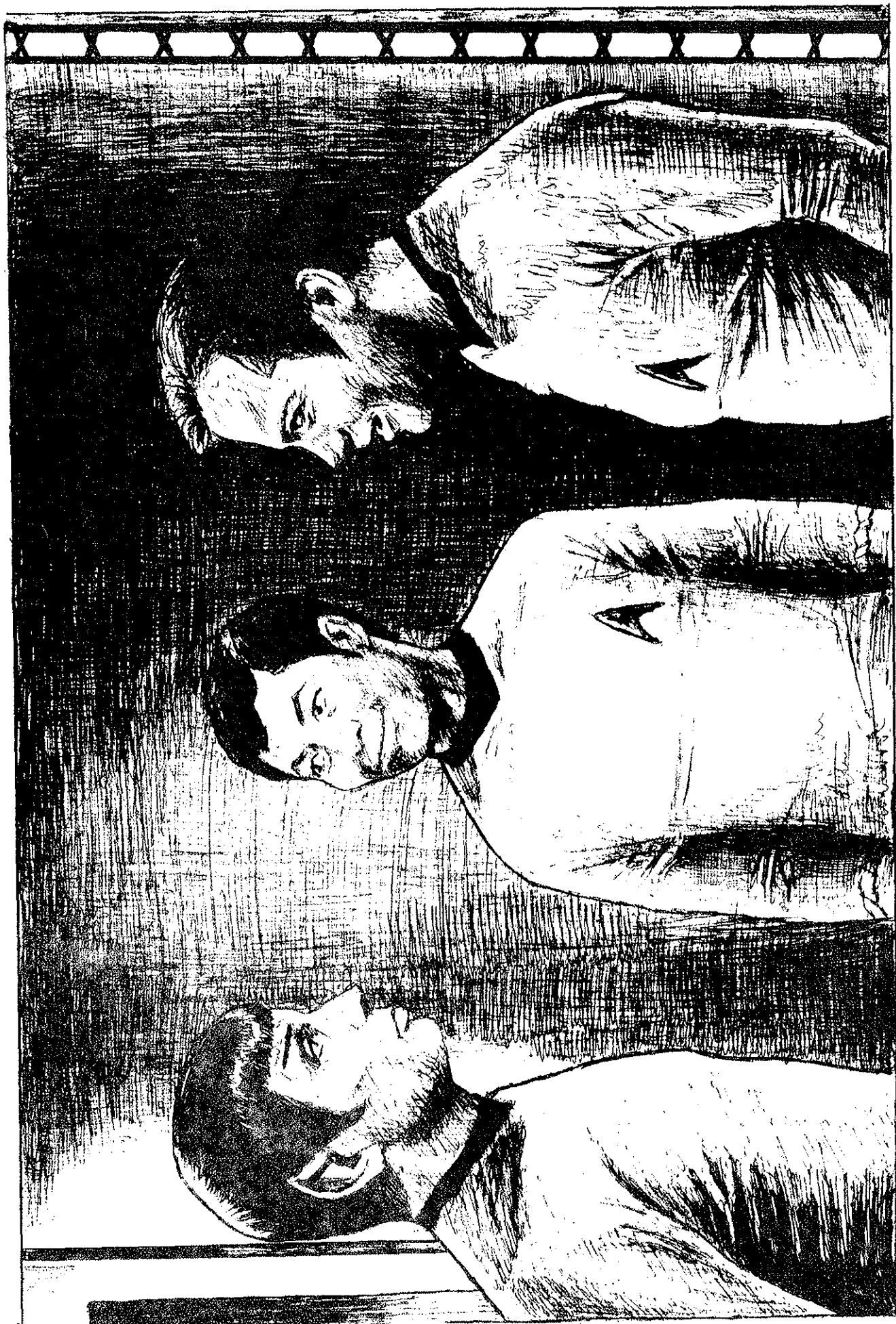
"We are not your patients, Doctor." Spock indicated the pads, on which four zombies were standing stock still, as they had done since materialising several minutes earlier. McCoy ran his portable scanner over them, one by one. When he turned round, his face was grave.

"They're alive, Jim - if you can call it living. Everything is in perfect working order, even the brain. But beyond the basic life support function, their brains are empty. Jim, their minds have gone."

"You must not blame yourself, Mr. Sulu," said Spock, when, with the help of the computer's recordings, he had pieced together what had happened. "Using the Head of Talos to project illusions into the minds of the Klingon war party was a most logical course of action." There was no higher praise. "Now, if I may suggest, Captain, this plan to use the comet itself to attack the white hole - "

"Put it to the Stone Dwellers?"

"I was about to say that. Their intimate knowledge of the Hole may enhance the plan's effectiveness."



"Good idea, Mr. Spock. Lt. Uhura, see if you can open a channel."

"There will be no need, Captain." The voice of the Spokesman echoed hollowly around the bridge. "We can hear you perfectly. Two suggestions, if I may."

"Please, go ahead."

"Use the artificial warp drive in the first instance to boost the comet in its natural orbit. Apply full power only when it reaches aphelion. Impact with the Hole will then take place at a much higher velocity."

Spock keyed in some data. "Computing the settings now. What is your second recommendation?"

"Allow us to place a geometroid on the comet. With our telekinetic powers channelled through it, this will give a degree of guidance in the moments before impact. If we judge it correctly, it may be possible to gouge out sufficient of the Hole's material to form a new planet. We can soft-land the cube on it without damage to it or ourselves. And then - "

The Spokesman broke off, in a flurry of alternating sound and silence.

"I'm afraid we lost you there," Kirk said when communications had been restored. "Please repeat your last message."

"My friend was out of order." Now it was the Leader speaking. "We had a further suggestion, but decided that as your customs might forbid the granting of such a request it would not be ethical to make it."

"Please ask anyway, sir." And, as the silence persisted, "We owe you our lives."

"Very well. Thank you. We know that four of your people suffered a tragic accident while working on the comet. We have examined them telepathically and concur completely with your surgeon's findings. Their minds have been wiped clean and can never be restored. But - they can be replaced."

For once McCoy was ahead of Spock. "All four are donors."

"I do not follow you, Dr. McCoy."

"It is a term we use to describe those who are willing to donate their organs to others in the event of premature death, in order to save a life."

Kirk had now caught on. "You mean that you - ?"

"Not myself personally, Captain Kirk. For one thing, there are only four victims. Also, one of us must remain incarnate in order to maintain life support systems and initiate the - terraforming - of the new planet. If we successfully form a breeding colony there will be time enough for me to assume the body of one of our - their - descendants." He gave something very much like a sigh. "Then in time, I too may be able to die."

"You look worried, Mr. Spock."

"Not worried, Captain. But I am... concerned."

"Explain."

"The final two probes placed in the eye of the comet. There is a slight abnormality in the monitor readings, indicating that Lieutenants Keppler and Keppler may not have had time to secure them properly."

"Send another party to check them out?"

"Inadvisable, Jim. Not only is the anti-magnetism still dangerously strong, but ionization is already taking place. The odds against a landing party surviving long enough even to examine the probes, let alone rectify any deficiency, are of the order of nine hundred and seventy four point five to one."

"Unacceptable."

"I fear so, Captain."

"Then we'll go with what we have. Uhura, have the Stone Dwellers given the go-ahead?"

"Affirmative, Captain. The geometroid is in place."

Spock would not have approved of crossed fingers. Kirk crossed mental ones. "Engineering, stand by. Activate comet's drive in ten seconds from... now."

Wilson and Betty Keppler - or the bodies that had once housed them - walked jerkily into the transporter room, staring ahead of them with sightless eyes. The apparatus providing Wilson's locomotive stimulus was the identical one used when Spock had once been in a similar position. Three more sets had been hurriedly cobbled together; the Kepplers were closely followed by former Securityman Gough and Securityperson N'donga.

McCoy led each of them in turn by the hand to one of the transporter pads.

"Position them as far apart as possible, Doctor. Beaming a disembodied mind directly into a vacant body has not been previously attempted. It is logical to leave the maximum margin for error."

"Teach your grandmother, Spock."

"Since one of my grandmothers would have been handicapped by your Terran illogic, Doctor, the idea is not without its appeal. However, since neither is present in this universe, it is - impractical. Please rotate Mrs. Keppler through 34.5 degrees, and Gough through 341."

Gently, Nurse Chapel moved Betty Keppler clockwise; McCoy, who never took things literally, turned Gough 19 degrees anticlockwise. When they had done, both couples were facing each other.

Spock took a final look, decided that he was satisfied, and said, "Energise."

Wilson Keppler's right eye glowed green; his left one flashed a brilliant ruby red. Twin beams of yellow light appeared from his nostrils illuminating his moustache. Betty Keppler had no moustache to floodlight, but in her the effect was no less peculiar.

Unpleasing though it might have been to Human eyes, it was obviously not so to alien ones. The Spokesman, who had merged into Wilson's body, glanced briefly at Gough and then, expressively, at N'donga, as if to say "I don't reckon your one!" He then made a swift beeline for Betty.

Far from being concerned, his companion made an equally rapid move towards the statuesque N'donga. Both couples were quickly locked in passionate embrace.

"Ahem," Kirk said tactfully, when it began to look as though the transporter pads were in real danger of being put to a hitherto unheard-of use. "Ladies and gentlemen, the comet is due to reappear in five minutes. I suggest we return to the bridge."

"Not us, Captain." Though it was produced by Wilson Keppler's vocal cords, the voice was unmistakably that of the Spokesman. "We must re-enter the Stone, to prepare for planetfall."

"Co-ordinates set, Mr. Kyle?"

"Ready and locked, sir."

The Spokesman held out his hand. "Goodbye, Captain Kirk. And thank you - for everything. What is the word you give? To transmit?"

"Energise?"

"So be it. Energise."

"Wait!" The Stone-Dweller who now inhabited N'donga spoke for the very first time. "There was something important we had to tell you. 'Remember the orrery'."

She was too late. Kyle had already depressed the levers; Kirk's "What about it?" was addressed to four shimmering pillars crowned with winking red, yellow and green lights.

A reply came, only partially distinguishable, even to the acute hearing of Mr. Spock: " - fashioned in the sight of Kxhlama and lashed by her tail."

"Spud, don't. You'll kill yourself."

Ensign Potato was stamping up and down the brig. "I'd sooner be dead than cooped up here, Miss." His hysterical shout attracted the attention of the two Klingon guards, who watched with growing anticipation. "Caged up like an animal. I'm going through that door and don't either of you try to stop me!"

He elbowed his way past Scott. The D.S.O. put a foot out as if to trip him, succeeding, it seemed, rather too well. Instead of

falling forward towards the wall, Potato flung himself to his left, crashing down with his head and shoulders clear through the brig door. He gave a dreadful cry, arched his back a full eighteen inches off the ground, then slumped down again.

And lay still.

"Comet's in sight, Captain."

"Put it on the screen, Mr. Sulu. Full magnification."

The gleaming red-gold eye of the comet flashed into view. For a minute or two, all looked to be going well, but then, without warning, the comet began to develop a violent corkscrew-like motion.

Chekov regarded it with alarm. "Keptin - eet's wobbling."

"I can see that, Mr. Chekov." Then, urgently, "Mr. Sulu. Evasive action. Fast!"

The corkscrew motion had ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and the comet had settled on a new course.

Straight for the Enterprise.

#### GOD IS A KLINGON

Captain's Log Stardate 6074.7

In a final attempt to avert the threatened destruction of time by the white hole Attuctac, a comet has been converted into a free-running warp drive and fired directly at the hole's heart. A malfunction has deflected the comet from its course and it is now heading straight for the Enterprise. The order for emergency evasive action has been given.

Chief Engineer's Log as at Stardate 6074.7.13

At this point, Deputy Science Officer Hinshaw, Ensign Potato and myself were still imprisoned in the brig of the Klingon Battleship Huba'al. The escape plan devised by the O.S.O. was then put into practice.

Potato's inert form lay in the open doorway for two full minutes. They were the longest minutes of his life.

Commodore Lung, with his usual arrogant contempt for those beneath him, had not bothered to explain to the two guards what he himself had deduced; that the force field acted only on free metal, such as that found in trace quantities in Klingon skin; non-metallic materials could pass through it unharmed. The question was, had the guards figured it out for themselves? If they had, they had only to grab him by the arms and pull him through the opening; the silver bullet which Lung had made him swallow, and which now reposed some way beneath his shoulders, would do the rest.

There was a sound of footsteps. Potato risked opening his

eyes. The guard was behind him, out of sight, but there was a shadow on the wall. It was standing on one leg.

For a big man, Potato could move lightning-fast. The contemptuous kick aimed at his head was already on its way, but he twisted, caught hold of the foot, and tugged with all his might. The guard, caught off balance, flung himself backwards. His colleague seized him by the arms and began to pull. Scott and the D.S.O., one to each ankle, did the same for Potato, and a grim tug o' war ensued. It was two to one, but a close thing for all that. It ended when the guard on the floor began lashing out with his free foot. A backward kick from a steel-tipped heel caught Potato a fearful blow on the knuckles, causing him to slacken his grip. It was enough. Suddenly freed, the two sides flew apart. Scott and the D.S.O. ended up in a pile of arms and legs on the brig's only bunk. The Klingon reeled across the corridor, crashing his head on the forcefield's master switch before sagging to the floor.

The first guard dragged himself to a kneeling position. Scott watched idly as he looked up at the master switch, then suddenly, anxiously, at the prisoners, before climbing slowly to his feet and strolling across the corridor, making a great effort to appear nonchalant.

Suddenly the significance registered. "Yon shiny must'a knocked the switch off wi' his head!"

Sure enough, the blue DANGER light above the switch was out. With a wild cry of "Charge!" Scott leaped off the bunk, bounded through the doorway and took the Klingon full in the back, just as he was reaching for the button. There was a crunch of breaking nose as the guard made hard contact with the wall; with a groan, he slithered to the floor to join his partner.

Scott pointed to the switch. "Come on, it's all clear."

They had almost made it to Lung's transporter when there came the sound of voices from a side corridor. Scott flung open the nearest door.

"Inside, quick!"

They found themselves in a high, sumptuous room, in which gilded pipes led to a wash-hand basin and, beyond it, a deep sunken bath adorned with ornamental carvings of Klingon marine creatures. Both bath and wash basin were fashioned out of a golden marble-like stone. Above the latter was an illuminated mirror, decorated with an ornate monogrammed 'S'.

Klingons were not noted for personal hygiene, much less for vanity. Except one. Wide-eyed, the D.S.O. exclaimed, "This must be Lung's personal bathroom!"

Potato looked around him, took in the rich decoration and the rows of soaps, unguents, lotions and potions arranged on the shelves by the mirror.

"He's a poofter!" he announced in a tone of finality, as if that explained everything.

"Cleanliness is next to godliness, Mr. Potato," admonished

Scott, rather primly.

Potato thought about that for a bit. "Yez don't mean that God is a Klingon?"

The D.S.O. laughed. "Not this Klingon, Spud, that's for sure. I can't imagine him with a halo!"

Which just goes to show how wrong you can be.

Scott had been listening at the door. "All clear. Come on."

This time they reached the transporter without incident, and hurried inside. Scott made a careful examination of the controls to make sure he understood them, then pressed the energise button and joined the others on the single large pad.

Two of them were to return within hours. Of their own free will.

At the exact moment Scott, D.S.O. Kinshaw and Ensign Potato transported across to the Enterprise, momentous events were taking place in the cosmos around them.

"She's not answering quickly enough, Captain. We'll miss - but not by much."

Kirk left the command chair and crossed to where Sulu was wrestling desperately with the controls.

"I have a suggestion, Captain."

"By all means, Mr. Spock."

"Sensors show one probe completely dislodged and a second malfunctioning intermittently."

"Continue."

"Our projected course is for a one third orbit above the eye, before returning to deep space. We will be in phaser range for five point seven five seconds. If we take out the defective probe - number seven - and also probes one and four, the comet should be deflected back on target, at a reduced velocity. It will call for very precise timing and great accuracy."

"Can you do it, Mr. Sulu?"

"I'll try, sir." Then, more confidently, "Yes, sir, I can."

Enterprise and comet closed rapidly. The nearer the comet came, the more difficult the shot looked. Its tail had been pointing towards the Dark Star, but was coming more and more under the influence of Attuclac, swinging round to meet it. To make matters worse, the intermittent action of the loose probe was causing an oscillation in the tail's movement. The effect was of an alligator, advancing backwards on its foe while swishing its tail angrily from side to side.

"Phasers locked on target, sir. But I'll have lost visual by the time we're in range. That tail will be right in the firing

line."

"Kuba'al's closing, Keptin," warned Chekov suddenly.

"I don't have to deal with him now. If he comes too close, put a photon torpedo across his bows. And Mr. Chekov - "

"Keptin?"

"Miss him. But not by much."

Spock looked up from his console. "Firing range in ten seconds."

"Fire as you bear, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Sulu's fingers flickered nimbly over the keys. Three incredibly short bursts of phaser fire penetrated the comet's tail. Three brief glows, instantly extinguished, were the only sign that the phasers had struck home.

The comet moved.

"Hard aport!"

Even Kirk, whose delivery was normally so calm, found himself shouting that one. Not for the first time, all on board the Enterprise had cause to be grateful for the automatic cushioning built into her gravity systems as the ship, travelling close to warp speed, took the only escape route left to her, through a narrow gap in the tail itself. The Kuba'al, following close behind, was also lashed by the tail, even more severely.

For an instant there were four ships. Two Kirks. Two Spocks. Two Lungs. Two of everything and everyone.

The effect lasted for, perhaps, one twenty fifth of a second which, coincidentally, was the exact time that Scott and Co. were aboard neither ship as they beamed across the narrow gulf between the two.

Even in that short space of time the second, malevolent, Kirk managed a smile of triumph. Then, as everything merged again, the outward smile was hastily extinguished - but the triumph was still there, undetected and undetectable. The enemy within had returned.

"Transporter to bridge."

"Yes, Mr. Kyle?"

"Three beamed across from Kuba'al."

"Clap 'em in irons. I'll deal with them later."

"But sir - they're our people. Mr. Scott, Miss Kinshaw and Ensign Potato."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say "You heard my order, Mr. Kyle," but previous defeat had served to sharpen the malevolent Kirk's cunning. Scott represented a threat, having witnessed his previous coming, but there was a far greater risk of detection in any

deviation from Kirk's normal patterns of behaviour. Everything must appear to be as it should - until he was ready to strike.

Forcing his lips into a smile, he said, "That's wonderful news, Mr. Kyle. I'm on my way. Mr. Spock, please take the conn. Kirk out."

"Has it worked, Mr. Spock?"

"I believe so, Mr. Sulu." Spock straightened up. "There is a definite slowing in the hole's advance. I'd put it at as much as - oh, I don't know - about ten percent, I suppose."

Attuclac was now clearly visible, fully a part of the white universe. Spock pointed to a corner of the viewscreen, where an irregularly had appeared on the hole's outer circumference, silhouetted in dark blue against the white of the surrounding cosmos.

"Um - that's odd. What do you make of it, Mr. Chekov?"

Chekov might have been expected to peer at it intently before announcing proudly, "Eet's a pimple, sir." He did nothing of the kind, but instead snapped to attention, sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"A planet-sized excrescence on the surface of the white hole, Meester Spock. I would speculate that the reduction in the comet's velocity has resulted in a partial failure of the plan to carve out a new home world for the Stone Dwellers." There was a sharp click of heels for beneath the navigation table. "Sah!"

Similarly, Spock's predictable response might have been a quizzical raising of eyebrows accompanied by a pleasantly surprised, "An excellent analysis, Mr. Chekov." But he merely said, "You could be right. I suppose we ought to tell the Captain."

And promptly forgot all about it.

"Spud. Wake up!"

"What - ?" It seemed only minutes since Potato had flopped down in his bunk, but was in reality almost three hours. "Wha's up, Miss?"

"We've got to get back to the Kuba'al. Now."

"But we've only just left it."

"That was before I realised. Spud, I know why Lung was made Commodore. Haven't you noticed anything funny since we got back?" Potato shook his head. "Everybody's different. Pavel Chekov's gone all incisive. Uhura's behaving like an Amazon warrior - I can't imagine her ever saying 'Captain, I'm frightened!'. And Mr. Spock - he's - illogical."

That had been the clincher. Once the O.S.O.'s suspicious that some thing was amiss had grown into a certainty, she had tried a simple test. Approaching Spock in the corridor, she had asked casually, "Mr. Spock, can I ask you something? It's been puzzling

me for ages. About your cousin."

"Skunk?" The half-bred Vulcan/Klingon had been instrumental in helping to solve the mystery of the white hole, and in extricating the Enterprise from its clutches.

"Yes. How on earth did he come by a name like that?"

A Spock who was himself would have pointed out that Skunk did not come by his name on Earth, but that was not the D.S.O.'s trap. "I mean, with his mother's name sounding like an Earth animal too."

Spock blinked a couple of times. "I suppose she just liked the name," he said. And walked away.

The D.S.O. lost no time in putting the same question to Skip-Spock. "It's too much of a coincidence, surely. T'Pir sounding like Tapir, and Skunk such a perfect name for a Klingon."

Skip considered the matter.

"Coincidence is often a pointer to certainty, Miss Hinshaw. And in this case, the certainty is absolute."

"Sorry, Mr. Sp - Sorry, Skip. I don't follow you."

"Then apply some of the logic you have been taught, and consider. Klingon custom requires a son's name to be in some way descriptive of the father. Vulcan usage invariably names a male child in the form S23QH. Now Skunk was the name of a mighty Vulcan warrior, in the dark years before we foresaw such barbarities. It was therefore an entirely logical choice for the name of a Vulcan/Klingon." If it had been Spock talking, the D.S.O. would have sworn she detected a hint of amusement underlying the carefully controlled expression. "It would have taken a more logical mind than Halong's to realise that as T'pir's own name bore resemblance to a Terran mammal, she would have been set the subject for study as a child. And therefore been fully aware of the other connotation of the word skunk."

"Potato looked up. "But what does it matter, Miss? Sure and the Captain's O.K., isn't he?"

"He *seems* O.K.," the D.S.O. admitted. "But then he would, wouldn't he?"

"You mean - ?"

The D.S.O. nodded. Both of them had heard the story of that other Kirk, who had turned out to be their Kirk's own personal Edward Hyde. "He'll have learned his lesson this time."

Five minutes later, both of them were back on the Kuba'al.

When Kirk strode back on to the bridge, he found a commotion awaiting him.

"Thank goodness, Captain. I've been trying to reach you. We have contact with the Stone Dwellers."

Kirk's instinct was to say "So?", but he still had himself under

control. "Put them on audio, Lieutenant."

"Captain Kirk." The Leader sounded very anxious. "The plan has only partially succeeded. The new Home World has not fully detached from the white hole."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"You have sufficient power in your ship's phasers to complete the separation process."

"I'll think about it."

"Jim. What is there to think about?" The Human half of Spock might be less logical, but he was - literally - more Human.

"When I want your advice, MISTER Spock, I'll ask for it."

"Captain, there is very little time," the Leader persisted. "The planetary mass is already being re-ingested. Once the process is complete, I and my companions will be irretrievably marooned in this block of stone."

"No worse off than you were before." Dr. McCoy, too, had a dark half, which now predominated.

"Infinitely worse off, Doctor," put in the Spokesman. "Now that four of us have mortal bodies, we shall be faced with a stark choice between returning to our previous state or a lingering death."

"I've thought about it." Kirk-2's last vestiges of control were slipping away. "If we allow such an advanced civilisation to re-establish itself on this side of the hole, then sooner or later it will become a threat to ours. You will just have to make your choice, Spokesman." He smiled, a most unpleasant smile. "I have made mine."

"Captain Kirk." The Human Spock spoke quietly but vehemently. "That is the most barbarous thing I have ever heard. Even from a Human."

Kirk looked across at Spock; a strange look, almost as though he were seeing him for the first time. "My God, you're beautiful when you're angry!"

"Captain?" And as Kirk began to advance on him, arms outstretched and amorous gleam in eye. "Captain, what are you thinking of? Restrain yourself, I beg you."

"Be mine, gorgeous creature, be mine."

Spock, backing hastily away from a Fate Worse Than Death, came up against one of the bridge rails. Kirk was on him in a flash. The outstretched arms encircled his neck - and felled him with a classic nerve pinch.

I knew I could do it - NOW!" Kirk looked exultantly round the bridge. "Lt. Uhura, have a double security detachment take him to the brig. I don't think our scrupulous half-breed friend would approve of what I have in mind."

Uhura moistened slightly parted lips and gazed at him provocatively. "What do you have in mind, Kirk?"

"You'd be surprised." He laughed. "Though not too surprised, I hope."

"Try me."

"Later, Lieutenant."

"Not too much later - I hope!"

"Are we going home, Jim?"

"Yes and no, Bones, yes and no. Yes through the hole, no to Starfleet. With a ship like this we can take the universe by storm. Both universes, if need be. I say we make Black Jak and his crew look like the Pilgrim Fathers." Again he scanned the sea of eager faces. "Are you with me?"

"AYE!" roared those assembled. Of the few who might have opposed him, D.S.O. Kinshaw and Potato were on the Kuba'al, Spock was out cold and Scott, who had laughingly dismissed the D.S.O.'s assertion that something was amiss, was asleep in his cabin.

"What's the plan, Keptin?"

"First we shake off that Klingon. There's now enough free anti-matter in the Hole for us to bulldoze a way through using our shields. He won't be able to follow without the protection of our gravity cushion. He'll be marooned here - and marooned men tell no tales. Once through, there'll be nobody left to stop us. We'll be rich!" He smiled as the prone form of Spock was carried past him. "Rich. Rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"Hello, my dear. Welcome back." Lung smiled benignly at D.S.O. Kinshaw, then glanced at Potato. "I see you've brought your chaperon with you."

The D.S.O. adopted her most deadpan expression. "But of course, Commodore. After all -" sweetly - "there is your reputation to consider."

Lung laughed heartily, and put his arm around her shoulders in a fatherly manner. The D.S.O. allowed herself an inward sigh of relief. An unproven theory, however well founded, is still only a theory. But all was well. The epidemic of opposites was not confined to the Enterprise.

The Kuba'al's control room was laid out very differently from the bridge of a Federation Starship. It was shaped in the form of a wedge of Camembert cheese. The command chair and desk were at the front, closest to the main viewscreen and hailing link cameras, so that when a visual link was established the ship's commander would appear in formidable close-up. Behind and to the Commodore's left was the science station; to his right was the First Officer. Lesser members of the control crew sat in tiered stations on either side of a central gangway. Cut in the rind of the cheese was the main entrance doorway. Above that was a bridge structure, on which the Control Pilot sat in splendid isolation, overlooking the panoramic view provided by view screens located all along the walls. His amplified voice boomed along the length of the wedge.

"Commodore. The stone cube is approaching within hailing

range. They are trying to make contact."

"I have them, Commodore." The Communications Officer touched a heat-sensitive switch. "On mains."

"But of course, my dear fellow," said Lung expensively when the Leader had explained their predicament. "Happy to oblige. Pilot, take us as close to the Hole as you can. Weapons, arm amasers." He swivelled back to face the hailing camera. "Don't worry, we'll soon lop you off a planet."

It was not to be quite that easy.

"Keptin." Chekov was sitting to attention again. "Kuba'al's set a course for the white hole. I think he's going to detach the planetoid."

"The hell he is!" snarled Kirk. "Extend shields, Mr. Sulu. And set a straddle pattern of photon torpedoes. We'll take him out."

The first torpedo struck the Kuba'al dead amidships. If her pilot had not parried it with a double shield, the damage might have been fatal. The remaining three torpedoes were partially deflected, but their force was still sufficient to leave the shields severely weakened.

"Hold your course, Pilot. Damage reports?"

"Ain't we gonna zap her, Chief?" A new and unexpected voice, this.

Lung turned to his left with a most reproving frown.

"On the contrary, Mr. Keras. The Earthlings have a most apt phrase; we shall turn the other cheek."

The Science Officer rose and squared up to his superior officer. "Now see here, Mister. You may wanna get both halves of your ass shot off, but include me out!"

The coarseness of voice and expression came from so unlikely a source that for a moment D.S.O. Kinshaw was completely floored. But if voice and expression were surprising, the Science Officer's next actions were astounding. The D.S.O. watched open-mouthed as he removed bushy Klingon eyebrows, wiped smears of shiny green-brown Klingon complexion from his face and finally peeled off tightly-fitting false ears, allowing Vulcan ones to spring up in all their glory.

"Ambassador Sarek!" she gasped.

There was no time for explanations. The Enterprise was coming at them again, phasers blazing. They looked to be caught fair and square, but the Klingon pilot, like Sulu, was the best in his fleet; the two were well matched. Leaving the manoeuvre to the last second, he side-slipped like an aeroplane, dummied like a wing threequarter and, with the Enterprise hopelessly wrong-footed, streaked past her towards his target.

Lung peered intently at the forward view. "Hold your fire. Hold. Hold. Hold. Ready - FIRE!"

A swathe of simulated anti-matter sliced through the three-dimensional isthmus joining the embryo planet to the white hole. The resulting surge of anti-gravity sent it spinning on its way, out of reach of the hole's clutches. A blinding fireball of light energy - real, brilliant white light, not what passed for light in this topsy-turvy universe - remained on the hole to show where the planet had once been.

Lung stood glorying in his triumph, watching the world he had created. Light shining from the screen in front of him enveloped him like a halo. "Let there be light!" he cried.

"Bejesus," Potato was heard to mutter. "God IS a Klingon!"

"Is that a sight or is that a sight?" demanded Sarek rhetorically.

"It certainly is, Ambassador. OOOEEEK!" The sentence ended in half squeak, half yelp, total surprise, as the D.S.O. found herself most comprehensively goosed. "Ambassador Sarek! What would Amanda say?"

"She should be so lucky." Sarek's voice took on a wistful note as the stuffed shirt in him fought and lost a brief battle for supremacy. "I had no idea that life could be fun!"

Far away, planet and stone cube moved together, rapidly at first, then slowing more and more as the Leader concentrated all his telekinetic powers on achieving a perfect soft landing.

The cube settled ponderously, firmly, into newly formed bedrock, standing harsh and stark against a jagged skyline. Thin wisps appeared; curled, twisted and enveloped it; the first of many clouds of oxygen and water vapour culled from hydrated silicate rocks. The terraforming of the new Home World had begun.

"It is no use, Mr. Scott." Spock screwed up his face in an agony of concentration. "I - can - not - think - clearly."

The alien Kirk might have gained the ability to perform the Vulcan nerve pinch, but the humanoid Spock had not lost it. He had come to when dumped unceremoniously on the floor while his two captors opened up the brig. Waiting until they stooped unguardedly to lift him again, he reached up and anaesthetized both with a perfect left-and-right hander. Now it was the guards who languished in the brig while Spock sought the comparative safety of Scott's cabin.

Scott had been kicking himself.

"Ah should have listened to young Kinshaw. That lassie has a nose for trouble. I think she keeps a miniature radar set in that wee bump at the bridge. What are we gonnae do, Mr. Spock?" It was this last which had prompted Spock's despairing reply.

"I must try to think laterally. If I cannot emulate my own half

of the SKip program, I should at least be able to manage the other."

Scott jumped out of his chair. "That's it!"

"Talk to SKip, you mean? Good idea, Mr. Scott. That should not have been affected by - whatever has caused this."

Scott was grinning all over his face. "Better than that, Mr. Spock. Can ye do the Vulcan mind meld with an inanimate mind - a computer's for instance?"

"I do not know if I can even do it with another Vulcan, now."

"Ye can still do the nerve pinch," Scott reminded him.

"True." Spock forced himself to recall the lessons in Vulcan biology he had learned as a child. "There is no theoretical reason why not. The mind meld is essentially an electrical phenomenon, and as computer circuitry approximates closer and closer to that of the living brain... Yes, Mr. Scott, it might work. But - " his face fell again - "the computer itself will be heavily guarded and the main science station is on the bridge, under the Captain's control."

"Aye, Mr. Spock. But the backup science station is in Engineering - under mine."

The guard at the entrance to the Restricted Area saluted smartly. "All well, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, lad, just fine." Scott pointed to the tall figure behind him, clad from head to foot in heavy protective clothing. "Just a routine inspection of the main impulse chamber."

The guard stood aside, allowing Scott and Spock to pass through. Once inside, they turned and made for the well-equipped little cubby-hole which was the D.S.O.'s battle station.

Spock divested himself of his radiation helmet and spoke into the computer's voice input node. "Execute Skip program."

"Working."

The processor which was the system's local brain was connected to the central computer by four different paths; conventional cables, fibreoptic strands encased in the ship's fabric, shortwave radio and a direct communication link which was the nearest thing Vulcan scientists had been able to devise to artificial telepathy. If any three of the four were put out of action, the system could still function using the remaining one. Spock brought his forehead into contact with the unit's casing, at the same time placing his hands on the touch-sensitive plates used by the computer for the evaluation of unknown objects. Slowly his voice deepened and hollowed, as he stared at, through, and far beyond the wall of the little cabin.

"Yes... Yes... I... see... Yes. I... must... remember. 'Lashed by her tail'. Of course. I see it all clearly now."

He stepped backwards, breaking the contact; swayed, put his hand to his forehead and steadied himself with the other on the back of the D.S.O.'s vacant chair. Scott reached out anxiously, but Spock brushed him aside. "Thank you, Mr. Spock, but there is no cause for

concern. A moment's faintness often follows the mind meld, but I am quite recovered."

"Did ye learn anything, Mr. Spock?"

"There was nothing to learn that was not already... self-evident. Remember the words of the last Stone-Dweller to leave; 'fashioned in the light of Kxhlama and lashed by her tail'. That tells me everything."

"It does?"

"Of course. She was clearly referring to the orrery with which the Stone-Dwellers summoned us to this universe. It was, if you recall, fashioned out of a pure white coal." He stopped, as if all had been fully explained.

Dr. McCoy would have been close to apoplexy, but Scott just prompted, "Aye, Mr. Spock?"

"Kxhlama must be the Stone-Dwellers' name for the comet. It would seem logical to presume that exposure to its tail causes a shift in properties, in one direction only. Coal becomes white. Light becomes darkness - and dark light. Logic becomes confusion. And good - becomes evil."

"And the Enterprise passed through the tail of the comet?"

"Just before Jim - and the rest of us - underwent a personality change."

"But why did we three no' change too?"

"Because you chose that moment to transport across from the Kuba'al. Timing which, as it transpired, was most - fortuitous. Dematerialised, you passed through the tail unaffected."

"Aye, it all fits." Scott looked as woebegone as ever. "But it doesnae help much."

"On the contrary, Mr. Scott. The solution to our difficulty is crystal clear. The white hole has absorbed the comet, tail and all. When the Captain takes us back through - as he most assuredly will - we must see to it that our route takes us once again through the cometary material."

"But how, Mr. Spock? How?"

"That is a question to which I shall now apply myself. Logically."

"And Spock?"

D.S.O. Kinshaw smiled. "I don't think anything could turn Mr. Spock evil, Ambassador. He just became sort of... Human."

Sarek looked appalled. "Jeez, the poor guy!"

The D.S.O. led him gently back to the point. "But how did you know it would happen? You did know, didn't you? That was why Lung was put in charge of the expedition."

"We didn't know, exactly. But it was a helluva good bet. That orrery thing they sent started to affect people. Turned 'em kinda inside out. The High Council figured out what it might do to a guy like Kirk. But they shipped me along to hedge our bets, in case it was all hooey and Lung stayed as big a sonofabitch as ever."

"Commodore," the Pilot boomed out from his eyrie. "The Enterprise is moving. Heading for the Hole, shields fully extended forward."

"Analysis, Mr. Keras."

Sarek leaped to his feet. "After her, Chief. If she gets away we're stuck here. Gotta stick to her tighter'n a turd to a sheep's tail."

Lung smiled, the superior smile of one who is aware of, and rejoices in, his own holiness. "Always think beautiful thoughts, Mr. Keras. Beautiful thoughts merit beautiful language. Pilot, be sure to follow the Enterprise most closely."

"Get in her blind spot," Sarek advised. "Make like we wuz a sehlat whopping one up a lady sehlat." And as Lung shot him a glance of utter disgust, "Ain't no more beautiful thought to a sehlat, Chief."

"Or to a lady sehlat," added D.S.O. Kinshaw demurely.

The Enterprise moved ahead, trails streaming from the edges of her forward shields as the bow-wave of anti-matter she was creating spilled and reacted with the ever-present stellar winds.

"Anti-matter buildup complete, Captain."

"Full impulse power, Mr. Sulu. Take us through."

The Enterprise, making - though she didn't know it - like a lady sehlat, penetrated Attuclac the White Hole for the second time. The familiar 'whup' of pseudo-pressure announced the fact to the ship's company. This time they were ready for it, and were still breathing comparatively normally.

The bridge doors opened, admitting Dr. McCoy. He had come to remind Kirk that the life-support systems had to be programmed to compensate for the loss of pseudo-pressure when they emerged, but the first thing he saw was the main screen. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a croak came out.

Sulu and Chekov were more vocal.

"Captain (Keptin) - look!"

Snarling in triplicate in their path was a three-headed metal monster. The leading head, down whose throat they were about to fly, was filled to overflowing with mighty teeth; the incisors alone must have been a thousand kilometres long. The head to starboard was breathing twin streams of fire through cavernous nostrils, while that to port, lips pursed, was expertly spitting a stream of photon torpedoes in the direction of the Enterprise.

"Evasive action, Mr. Sulu," said Kirk unnecessarily.

Expertly, Sulu dipped the ship's trajectory, then at the last moment pulled up, passing through the horns atop the central head, only to find two mighty tails lashing inward, threatening to cut the ship in two. He threw the Enterprise to port, slipping along the line bisecting the closing scissors, which snapped shut behind her.

Now there was only one head, one figure. Its hand was raised, palm forwards,, in the universal signal to halt, and its smiling face was that of the true James T. Kirk. The lips moved, the Kirk's commanding voice filled the ship.

"Not this way, Impostor. Turn again. Turn, I say."

The malevolent Kirk on the Enterprise had all of Kirk's knowledge and memories. Now he understood.

"You can't fool me with your damned illusion, Talos. I'll have your brains mashed up and fed to you through your own drip. Out of my way, 'Kirk'. I'm coming through." So saying, he drove the ship smack between his own eyes - little knowing that the Head of Talos, prompted by Spock, had fashioned its illusion out of the last vestiges of the tail of the comet. The Kuba'al, her cursing pilot fighting to keep station, followed them through.

"As I was saying, after prolonged exposure to the orrery, one prominent Vulcan scientist even became... illogical. Is something the matter, Miss Kinshaw?"

The D.S.O. had jumped up in alarm. "I think it's time we got back to the Enterprise, Ambassador," she said urgently.

"Why should that be?"

"Because you have started to sound yourself again. And if you are yourself again - "

"So is Lung. You are right, Miss Kinshaw. Logic dictates our immediate departure."

Keeping a low profile, so that Lung would not be reminded of their existence - or of his own rebirth - Sarek, Potato and the D.S.O. slipped quietly out of the control room. Just outside the door, the D.S.O. turned back.

"Where are you going, Miss Kinshaw? Time is pressing."

"Shan't be a minute, sir. I just want to get something."

She returned with a small crystal cassette. "Computer records."

"A souvenir, Miss Kinshaw?" Sarek sounded at his most disapproving."

"In a manner of speaking, Ambassador." The D.S.O.'s blue-grey eyes turned their flintiest grey at the memory of Lung's cruel laughter as he watched them swallow the silver bullets. "I want to give Mr. Lung something to remember us by."

The Enterprise emerged into delicious, familiar, inky

blackness. Stars, all the colours of the rainbow except black, winked a silent chorus of welcome. Almost simultaneously, the 'snapp' of a Klingon transporter deposited Sarek and his companions on the Enterprise.

The D.S.O. dashed off the pad to the nearest intercom. "Kinshaw to Captain Kirk."

"Glad to have you back, Miss Kinshaw."

"You too, sir." (Feelingly). "Captain, watch out for the Kuba'al. She's tucked between our pods, making like -" She caught Sarek's cold eye and stopped, covered in confusion.

"All right, Miss Kinshaw, I get the picture. Mr Sulu -"

"Aye, sir." Sulu flung the Enterprise into a manoeuvre which a pilot of an earlier age would have recognised as a perfect Immelmann turn.

Finding his enemy suddenly coming towards him, Lung was tempted to make a fight of it, but with the Kuba'al's shields severely buckled from their previous encounter it would have been no contest. Lung might have been a psychopath, but he was not a stupid psychopath. The Kuba'al veered to starboard and, with no word of farewell, set course for home.

Sarek entered the bridge, greeting his son with the coldest of Vulcan salutes. To have shown relief at finding Spock alive would have betrayed years of training in the proper suppression of warmth and emotion. The plan to deceive Lung into thinking that in destroying the Earth Mother he had also destroyed his greatest enemy had been one of unflawed logic. That a transporter malfunction at a vital moment would maroon Kirk and Spock in the stone could not have been foreseen, any more than could the unexpectedly happy outcome. Even Amanda, who knew him better than anyone, would have been hard-pressed to spot the faint flicker of thankfulness in his eyes before they began roving the bridge for a means of diverting attention.

They lit on the D.S.O., who was busy fitting the crystal cassette into the universal data recorder.

"What is that you have there, Miss Kinshaw?"

"Kuba'al's bridge log, Ambassador. I thought the Captain and Mr. Spock might find it... interesting."

It was not long before the whole Enterprise was roaring with laughter at the spectacle of a saintly Lung turning the other cheek. Only Spock remained impassive, save for a quizzical lift of the eyebrow at the sight of his pretty young assistant being groped by his father. (Sarek watched the incident without a flicker.)

"Oh dear, oh dear!" Kirk wiped away tears of laughter. "I hope nobody ever sends that to Klingon. Lung as the compassionate saviour. He'd never live it down. It would do him a power of no good!"

The D.S.O. glanced surreptitiously at Uhura, who responded with the briefest of nods. The tape was being transmitted on all Klingon



frequencies. "Wouldn't it just!" she said innocently.

Uhura saw Spock looking her way and decided it was time to create a diversion. "There's one thing I don't understand. If the tail of the comet caused the transformations, why weren't you and Mr. Scott affected the second time? You only passed through once."

"That's odd." The D.S.O. mentally examined herself for horns and a tail. Finding none, she continued, "I never thought of that."

"The comet's tail was very diffused by the time of the second transit," observed Spock. "Remember that the primary persona is likely to be more stable, and would be restored relatively easily. It would take a much more severe exposure to release the... darker side."

Further speculation was cut short by Sulu. "Foreign object, sir. Dead ahead."

"Put it on main screen, Mr. Sulu." Kirk looked up to see the familiar slight of a geometroid, spinning slowly on its axis. He was unable to resist adding, "Analysis, Mr. Chekov?"

"Eet's a - triangle, Keptin." Chekov gulped. "And eet's - pregnant."

"It's another orrery," the D.S.O. decided, when the pregnant geometroid had been delivered of three dark objects, before folding in on itself and disappearing.

Spock looked up from the sensors. "Quite correct, Miss Kinshaw. With your permission, Captain?"

"By all means, Mr. Spock. Mr. Scott, three objects to beam aboard. Straight to the bridge, I think."

This orrery, like its predecessor, was fashioned out of coal. Unlike its predecessor, it was coal black. Two of the three pieces were familiar; the representations of the White Hole and the Dark Star. The third was in the form of a young girl-child, holding a solid cube in her hand and examining it with a mixture of wonder and delight.

The orrery began to move, but with a difference. The 'Earth Daughter' followed a path similar to the orbit of the erstwhile Earth Mother, but the Hole had none of its former predatory look. On each pass it missed the Star and its single companion by a greater margin until finally, its influence on them exhausted, it passed into the bridge elevator and disappeared from view.

"Satisfactory, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk, when the spontaneous cheer had died away.

"Eminently so, Captain. It would appear that our mission is accomplished."

"I thought so too." Grinning broadly, Kirk sat down in his command chair. "I thought so too. Warp factor one - no, dammit, warp factor five, Mr. Sulu. Take us home."